

SOCIAL CHALLENGES AND LIFE CHALLENGES WHEN LEAVING THE INSTITUTION OF SOCIAL PROTECTION. ADOLESCENTS IN ROMANIA

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Résumé

Romania is a new European country facing lot of challenges issued by the new democracy and the new political position within Europe. Despite the existing programs aimed to support the adolescents brought up in institutions in their social integration process, the failures are not rare. We are going to present an intervention, therapeutically camp, organized with a group of 12 adolescents from institutions for social protection system. A case study will emphasize the outcomes of the institutional life as well as the results of the week within the therapeutically camp. A parallel between the difficulties of the adolescents brought up in institutions in their social integration process and the efforts of the current Rumanian society will be highlighted in the conclusion.

Mots clés : Romania, Adolescents, institutionalized children, therapeutically camp.

ملخص

إن رومانيا بلد أوروبي جديد، يواجه الكثير من التحديات التي نتجت عن الديمقراطية الجديدة والمواقف السياسية الجديدة في أوروبا. وبالرغم من وجود برامج تهدف إلى دعم المراهقين الذين ترعرعوا داخل مؤسسات الإنماج الاجتماعي، إلا أن الفشل غير نادر. سنتحدث في هذا المقال عن تدخل لمخيم علاجي، نظم لفائدة اثني عشر مراهقا قدموا من مؤسسات خاصة بنظام الحماية الاجتماعية، حيث ستبين دراسة حالة نتائج الحياة المؤسساتية وكذلك نتائج أسبوع داخل المخيم العلاجي.

وسنبرز في الخلاصة مقارنة بين الصعوبات التي يتلقاها المراهقون الذين ترعرعوا داخل المؤسسات في إطار عملية الإنماج الاجتماعي، والجهود المبذولة من قبل المجتمع الروماني الحالي.

الكلمات الأساسية: رومانيا، مراهقون، أطفال المؤسسات، مخيم علاجي.

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I – SOCIAL, POLITICAL AND LEGAL CHANGES IN ROMANIA

After 1990, the social political and economical environment in Romania entered a global process of change, at different levels and on different aspects. If we are talking about the laws, the outcome is spectacular: we have very good new laws concerning almost all aspects of the social life. Often it is said that the law concerning « the promotion and protection of children rights » (272/2004) is one of the best in the world. Unfortunately, the implementation of the law insides the services for children is far from the generous legal intentions. In 1997, under the strong recommendation of the European Union, an intense process was initiated to decentralize and deinstitutionalize. This process can sometimes be seen as a risk factor to the child's best interest. The social and political changes did not bring along the necessary variety of services to respond to the specific needs of children and adolescents in difficulty. There are even professions (like occupational therapist) missing in the rehabilitation area which is important in accompanying the institutionalized child in the process of social and professional integration upon leaving the institution. On the other hand, the capacity of the services that are carrying for the children in difficulty is by far outnumbered by the needs. In the urban area the services for the children in difficulty function reasonably. However, in the rural area these services are almost absent, except for the family doctor, who, in the majority of the cases, does not have special training in child problems.

To implement the law of children rights, as well as the development of the services addressing the child, are approached through the Romanian cultural and social representation of the child. At this level of the representation, the changes in the country did not bring along a positive vision of the child, in order to protect the child against the violence of the adults. The adults are in an acute stress, based on features inherited from the communist times. Within the communist area, the child was regarded as a threat to the family, and the couple was ready to do almost anything to avoid a pregnancy. The consequence was the devalorization of the child, an attitude which is still felt in all the areas regarding the child in Romania. As a prove, the child mortality in Romania is one of the highest in Europe.

The violence against the child is still far away from being assumed. Recent research run by UNICEF and the Europe Council, as well as other NGO-s, such as SN-CAN, bring into the society's attention the violence of the parents towards their children.

The mere existence of the research, plus the new legislation, are proofs of the benefic change in understanding the child's needs in Romania. Another proof of the positive change is the concern of the media to educate the Romanian society regarding the childhood. The pan-European program, «Building Europe with and for children», is running in Romania through some media agencies, aiming to educate the society against the violent treatment of the child.

II – THE CHANGES AS A SOURCE OF STRESS

Romania goes through an accelerated change, which generates an intense stress. The old values, norms and stereotypes of the social behavior are not functioning anymore. After 1990 a state of anomy is dominating the drifting Romanian society.

After 1997, the new values and norms of the child protection are being integrated in the official documents. We are still missing the mechanisms to put into practice these values and norms in the day-to-day Romanian reality.

Neurobiology demonstrates that any change, including a pleasant surprise, can be a source of stress to the human brain. The changes require the attention, which finalizes by adjusting to the new conditions. Stress is a reversible state if a new rule appears to reorganize the chaos created by the change. Thus, we may say that stress is an organizing factor, which mobilizes resources in order to a more efficient adaptation. However, some aspects are specific to each individual in the reaction to stress, such as: the gravity of the threat to the personal life, the length of the stress period, the presence of the social support (the social network) during the stressing times, the capacity to respond to stress (personal resilience).

The European statistics¹ show that 55% of the Romanians are stressed, with direct consequences on their health. Also Romanians come out as too focused on their own health status (35%). We are a population that just came out of the communist era, with little chance to go through the grief period, weakened and affected by changes which are difficult to understand. These are characteristics not only for Romanians but, to varying degrees, to all the societies that are living their post-communist era.

Some European statistics indicate that Romanians are the most depressive people from Europe. Other statistics conclude that we have the most

1. 1st February, 2007, the information was disseminated by Romanian media.

optimistic expectations from the future. This lack of consistency has to be analyzed in the context of the post-traumatic stress disorder. The Romanian society is characterized by infantile and bizarre reactions, inadequate to specific situations, and a lack of adaptation to the real situations. At least three characteristics of the post-traumatic stress disorder can be identified: intrusion, avoidance, and hyper-vigilance.

In order to understand the risk brought by the contemporary difficulties, we have to think about the trans-generational passing of the unhealed sufferings. Because the ghosts always remain in the children's rooms.

III – CHANGES SPECIFIC TO INSTITUTIONALIZED ADOLESCENTS : LEAVING THE INSTITUTION

In the midst of all this social and political changes there are adolescents in major difficulties, who become adults without a suitable support during this transformation. These are the adolescents abandoned by their biological parents, known or unknown, and who grew up their entire life in institutions of child protection. At the age of 18, the legal end of childhood, these adolescents have to leave the institution. Having their personal history behind, they face two options : to return to their biological family or to live an autonomous life. Both options are difficult to achieve.

The life in institution is not encouraging the autonomy and taking charge of the responsibilities. All of the sudden, adolescents with no abilities whatsoever are challenged to handle the responsibility of their life (material aspects : food, accommodation; integration in various social networks ; handling the social and emotional behavior in an acceptable manner). On the other hand, the great chance of healing by meeting the "other half", founding a family, raising children, is totally neglected by the institution, who is not offering any attention in this regard. The statistics² indicate that 85% from the children raised by parents who were in institutions are abandoned. They are the living proof that, if no repairing intervention takes place, the trans-generational passing of unhappiness happens.

The return in the biological families is practically impossible. The superficial preparation of both the child and the family for the re-unification, the lack of matching between the two parties, make impossible for the adolescent to reintegrate in his/her family. The expectations on both sides are hard to harmonize and the mutual tolerance is difficult to reach. The family bonding being destroyed at the beginning of their lives, the

2. 2005, Romanian Media.

life in institution, where the standards differ from a family life, all contribute to render almost impossible the return in a family with persons that for the adolescent are almost unknown. The failure of integration in the biological family brings the adolescents back to the gates of their initial institutions or on the streets, as a homeless. They become easy victims of the organized prostitution, delinquency, and criminality. Later on, the adolescents will return within the social protection system in Romania or in a foreign country, but this time within prisons.

For those for which no solution is found upon leaving the institution, there is the option to staying for another two years in the institution, upon request. Also, those who keep studying, can stay in the institution until they are 26 years old.

The ambivalence specific to adolescents in institutions is much more developed on the negative emotional side. They are rejecting the parents who abandoned them, but also the institution with all its staff. On the other side, the staff often develops defensive mechanisms, by over-identification with the abandoned child. This happens despite the regulations to support the bonding between the institutionalized child and his family. They reject the families and the parents who abandoned their children. In this way, the staff is not capable to support the child, to forget the family who abandoned him/her, and to pull the child from the hatred against the abandoning family. Locked in their world of rejection and hate, the institutionalized adolescents face the demanding requirements of the society in the process of social integration. The motivational aspect mentioned earlier is an important barrier to their social integration.

Manifesting either inhibitions or hyper-active states, the institutionalized children needs a lot of attention and positive emotions. This need is doubled by the incapacity to request and to respond in consequence. Failing to trust other people, the adolescents are incapable of benefiting from the help offered. Fear and lack of trust give them a permanent state of tension and superficiality in the communication with other people, especially when the topic of the communication is their own person.

1. HOW CAN WE SUPPORT THE INSTITUTIONALIZED ADOLESCENTS FOR SOCIAL INTEGRATION UPON LEAVING THE INSTITUTIONS.

We will present bellow an intervention with a group of adolescents abandoned by their biological parents. The adolescents were raised in the

residential institutions of child protection. The general aspects will be applied on the presentation of a case study.

The intervention targets to support a group of 12 adolescents (6 girls and 6 boys) aged between 16-21 years, all in various forms of formal education. The participation to the group was voluntary and a social worker who knew the adolescents went to meet the adolescents in the building of the institution (with the approval of the institution's director). At the meeting, the social worker presented an offer to the teenagers of a week of holiday in a therapeutic camp with organized activities. The adolescents were rather difficult to convince, although they had no other activities that could preclude their participation. With the director's support, who selected the most difficult adolescents, the group of 12 problematic adolescents was created and almost convinced.

The place of intervention in the camp was a village situated among hills and forests, a nice natural environment, with simple people and peasants that had kept until recently their traditional activities: wood carving and pottery. In this village a cultural center initiated a camp in simple conditions, with the food bought mainly from the village people. In the camp activated two young social workers, who were permanently present in the camp. The two social workers (a man and a woman) organized the daily activities in the camp, but were always available for private discussions with the adolescents. The basic life necessities (heat, food, hot water) were provided with the support from everybody. Every morning after breakfast the art therapy activities began with an Austrian specialist. Also group discussions were organized, aimed to build the group as a secured place, able to contain the words and behaviors in which the adolescents expressed, more or less clear, their personal history. Although the adolescents had spent 2-4 years together in the same institution, they did not know each other, not even the names. In the group, and continued by the other individual activities, a process was initiated to reflect on the personal life of the adolescents, and of a realistic plan for their life. All the participants were in a critical moment in their life, just before leaving the institution.



The art therapy exercise allowed the expression, through selection of colors, lines, and objects, as well as the movement of their entire body on the rhythm of music. Two walking trips were organized, which confronted the adolescents with the limits of their physical body.

Every day they could build up an individual time table choosing between art-therapy, group discussions, pottery and wood sculpture. The art-therapy and group discussions were held within the camp, with the professionals and the pottery and wood sculpture in the workshops in the village.

Case presentation : Costel

Costel was 17 years old. He was abandoned by his parents at birth. He was the youngest in a family that could not take care of its members. He met his family first 10 years ago, when the de-institutionalization policy put in touch the abandoned children with their families. At his first visit in the family, Costel did not want to spend more time with his parents, and he returned in the institution the same day. He found out that he had a psychotic brother who lived in a different city, and a sister who was married and had a child, and who lived in a city on the seaside. Later on, Costel used to spend a few days with his sister during his holidays. The parents did not take too much interest in Costel, nor did they have the room to accommodate him in their house.

Costel is a hyper-active adolescent, with a permanent instability, with aggression and an impulse to destroy objects that determines his peers to avoid him. He is not able to sit at the table and eat together with the others: either he sits and eats nothing, or he grabs all the food from the table and puts it on his plate. When you ask him something, he is not answering, and you have to repeat the question. His answers are monosyllabic. He wants to grab the attention of everybody, but when someone becomes interested in him, Costel turns his back and starts laughing. He is in the last year in vocational training and he also started to work. His future plan is to move to his sister's and to find a job there. But he does not have any initiative to apply his plan and the institution is not supporting him in any way. Costel is not able to keep a sheet of paper in front of him and to draw something, but he participates partially in the activities developed by the other colleagues. He then tries to disturb them and to make fool of some of the colleagues. Costel never finds himself a place among others, although he makes everything possible to attract their attention. He never takes the others into consideration and, similar to the autistic children, he is ready to always move forward, hitting the ones who stand in his way. A place among the others means rules, limits, emotional interactions, and he is not able to do these things. Costel has infantile gestures and commentaries, which suggest a mental retard. At some point, he manifested an exaggerate interest for a girl whom he saw for a short time during a trip and he insisted to get her phone number. By the next day he lost all his interest in that girl. Costel managed to remain still for more than one hour only while carving wood, together with the supervisor of the shop.



But he cannot stand the tasks with emotional charge. He has emotional outbreaks and starts shouting, swearing, and has aggressive gestures against the others. I asked him : what do you feel in such a moment ? We discussed about his feelings and the feelings that he induces in the other colleagues. He had tiers in his eyes, and he said « in the institution nobody asks this kind of questions. We are asked superficially "How are you" and we answer "Ok" and that's it ».

To what extent is Costel ready to leave the institution ? To take charge of his own life ? To share his life ? And to give life ?

There are therapeutic interventions³ which turn out not having a therapeutic outcome and there are actions outside a therapy which have a therapeutic effect.



The effects of the week spent in the camp, where the adolescents reflected intensely on their own life, on their past and their relationship with their parents, on their life plan, were evaluated in the day before departure. In the evaluations the adolescents indicated that : « the place of the camp and all the conditions were well selected », « I liked the activities organized here », « I appreciated the way that we were taken into consideration here », « I was more relaxed than ever », « I liked to carve and to make pottery, because in that time I forgot about all my fears and

1. Kari Killen stated the idea during a training for professionals in Timisoara, in 2005.

problems, and I managed to focus on the object that I was producing », « I liked to have the opportunity to choose », « I liked the friendly behavior of the trainers and the staff », « I like that I know myself better now », « it is good that we managed to know each other better », « I liked all the activities », « I learned to say <please> and <thank you> », « I liked the patience and the passion of the sculptor when he was helping us », « I liked to draw while listening to classical music », « I discovered myself », « I learned to have more patience with each other », « I felt well in the group ».

Other evaluations say : « I did not like that the guy from pottery was not very interested in the job », « some of the games were too infantile », « I did not like some of the art therapy exercises », « I did not like to work in the kitchen », « sometimes we lacked the team spirit », « we were not explained clear enough what was the aim of the camp », « I was disturbed by the persons who did not get involved in the group », « more strict rules would have been required, and more group activities ».

On the other hand, the staff of the institution noticed, upon the return of the adolescents, visible changes in their behavior.

The benefic effects were proved, but we have doubts about their duration. Probably a 5-year period with a two times per year repetition with the same group could be the necessary accompany for their social integration.

CONCLUSIONS : TELLING OR NOT TELLING ?

I presented the changes happening with a confusing dynamics of the Romanian society; the changes characteristic to adolescents ; the major changes imposed to the adolescents in difficulty, at the moment of leaving the institution, without a support for their social and professional integration.

As Costel said, « in institutions we don't speak about feelings and emotions ». Thus, the communication is loaded with negative emotions, and the level of tolerance to frustration is very low.

The story of the adolescents is a parallel process to what happens nowadays in the Romanian society. There is no time for reflection and for talking with the aim of finding ourselves and to grief after the communist times. The old times are very similar to life in an institution. We now try to advance fast, too fast, under external pressure. Obvious questions arise : Who will pay the price for such a progress ? Who is actually paying it now and will continue to pay ?

The adolescents presented managed only partially to benefit from the allocated therapeutic time when the individual and the group work were done in parallel.

Is the Romanian society able to benefit fully from the support given ? The great avatars and the permanent internal arguments suggest otherwise.

We all came out of communism as if from an institution. We need to reflect and to speak in order to advance more efficiently and with less sacrifice. Since all that you do not remember will trick you in the gestures of your body and in the destiny.

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