Resources, Limits and Educational Perspective in the Field of Out of Home Residential Care

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Abstract

This paper aims at deepening a biographical research project undertaken in 2017 and 2018, among people required to stay in residential childcare communities for a period of time when they were minors, due to of a range of family problems. The narrative work is aimed at reflecting on the interview contents to improve professional and organizational practice and dialogue, orientated towards an ecological view of caring, healing and reparation. The paper is articulated in two parts. The first part of the chapter offers a framework or summary related to the characteristics of residential childcare communities. The re-creation of this framework permits us to justify the choice to utilize biographical research methods to study these characteristics. The second part of the chapter focuses on the research fulfilled through the interviews, clarifying the context of the research. The main findings are professional and organizational changes that the research encouraged.

Keywords: education, child, residential care, biographical research

1. Studying the characteristics of out-of-home residential childcare: biographical research methods

1.1 An overview of the reality of residential childcare communities

Residential childcare is a type of care intervention directed towards children and teenagers that require support in integration or to meet the needs which biological parents were not able to provide. Residential childcare can consist of two different types of interventions: at the minor's residence or at the external "facility". This second modality takes the name of " out-of-home residential childcare" (Rus, Parris & Stativa, 2017, p. 470). Entering out-of-home residential childcare, the child must pass a period of time with a foster family or at a residential facility, due to a level of risk and inadequacy to which the child would be exposed in the biological family.

Out-of-home residential childcare, at the legislative level, is a protective intervention in the "supreme interest of the child" ratified by the Convention on The Rights of the Child (20 November 1989), with a specific reference to Article 20. Article 20 indicates that the child has the right to special assistance from the state if they are either temporarily or permanently deprived of their family context or of a suitable family situation in their own "best interest" (Liefaard & Sloth-Nielsen, 2017, p. 880).

This protective intervention can be carried out in agreement with the parents or often by the Judicial Authority's direction. In case it is not adequate or possible to give the child into the custody of relatives or a foster family care, the intervention foresees the placement of the child in a residential childcare community. The duration of stay at the residential facility is determined by the time required by the biological parents to be able to restore or re-create a suitable family situation for the primary needs of the child. To this aim, an appropriate amount of time is required, varying from a few months to some years, after which it could be possible to resort to adoption in the eventuality that the family's situation does not show any improvement (despite any interventions implemented in giving support to the biological parents during the period of the child's absence).

The importance of this protective intervention justifies the need for studies (currently not yet widespread) that can deepen the knowledge of out-of-home residential childcare, with particular regard to the residential childcare communities. There are some studies, below, that focus on the benefits, risks and damages that experiences in residential childcare communities could involve for minors The research on residential childcare communities, precisely because they concern children and the protection of their fundamental rights, is an excellent example of interaction between research, practice and policy. In fact, the results of this research cannot represent "only" the material of study and reflection but are always aimed at shaping new and best policy and practice, in dialogue.

A recent study of out-of-home residential childcare has been carried out by Rus, Parris and Stativa in 2017. In the text "Child Mistreatment in Residential Care: History, Research, and Current Practice", the authors reflect on mistreatments that institutionalized children can be subjected to inside residential childcare communities. The authors deepen the experience and understanding of mistreatment of institutionalized children in Romania, Spain, Germany, Ukraine, Turkey, Israel, India, Kenya, China, Sub-Saharan Africa, Latin America and the Caribbean, Australia and the USA. With an extensive excursus, the authors underline the risks of excessive punishments, for example, peer exploitation, sexual abuse, victimization by peers and staff, neglect and so on.

Other studies on residential childcare communities have been conducted starting from the analysis of the experience of care leavers and those becoming adults, leaving the residential childcare communities (Driscoll, 2018). Consecutively, after leaving the community, care leavers get involved in the research in order to carry out interviews on issues related to their experience. For example, Adley and Jump (2014) studied a small group of English boys between 18 and 21 years with semi-structured interviews. From their work it emerged that, although at the time of the dismissal from the residential structure the boys felt safe, shortly after a sense of inadequacy soon took over. Nevertheless, they refused to ask for help fearing to be considered "consumers" of social services again.

From the studies carried out, the research shows the risk that care leavers remain vulnerable people, even after their residential stay (Del Valle & Bravo, 2007). There also exists a strong probability that they will return to the social services loop within nine months of leaving the community (Li et al., 2014).

The studies do not only focus on negative aspects, but also on the positive aspects of the residential childcare communities (Sanders et al., 2017). Through research conducted in the form of qualitative interviews with 109 boys, this research has revealed some positive factors of the residential childcare communities that, when present, influence the children's quality of life during and after the residential intervention. Among the positive factors indicated were the presence of good communication, active involvement of the children, the continuity of professional care and the consistency of respect for the unique characteristics of each child.

1.2 Biographical methods and narrative interviews

The qualitative approach is recurrent in the research on residential childcare communities and the survey tool that is mostly utilized is the semi-structured interview. One of the main motives for this choice is directly related to the purpose of the research itself: to deepen the understanding of the subject's background experience related to the residential childcare experience.

Despite the fact that the semi-structured interview can be represented as a survey tool, which is consistent with the purpose of the research itself, it is not considered the most promising tool to understand people's background life experience, with particular regard to the topic of residential childcare.

The tool considered to be most appropriate for this type of survey is the narrative interview. The narrative interview is set within the framework of biographical research methods (Formenti & West, 2018; Merrill & West, 2012) and particularly in German biographical research methods (Alheit, 1982; Chamberlayne et al., 2000). When the narrative interview is intended not to explore the entire biography of the subject (life story interview), but only a period of time of their personal journey or of a specific topic, it is defined as life history: There is very little difference between a life story and a life history. They are usually different terms for the same thing. However, the difference between a life story and an oral history is usually emphasis and scope. An oral history most often focuses on a specific aspect of a person's life, such as work life or a special role in some part of the life of a community (Atkinson, 1998, p. 8).

The life history interview solicits the history of the person and "begins with a single, open-ended question" (Merrill & West, 2012, p. 119)2: "Talk to me about your history in relation to..." and it develops within a relationship that favors the expression of experience and feelings. The life history narrative interview turns out to be particularly suitable in research regarding residential childcare, for at least five different reasons:

First of all, the life history interview allows the person to build their own story of the experience, starting from what they consider most significant, giving space to every question dealt with in a personal way and leaving out issues and problems that might be relevant only from the point of view of the researcher. In the life history interview the person is therefore urged by the researcher to build a narrative of their background freely and as authentically as possible, without a predetermination of periods or topics to be discussed in a specific way. In the life history interview, however, the narration of the person is not completely left to chance. In fact, the researcher provides a careful selection of topics that have been identified as potentially crucial with respect to the field of investigation.

These issues are not detected sequentially through targeted questions but, in case the interviewee does not discuss it spontaneously, they are recalled into the dialogue to solicit some reflection from the person without directly conditioning them. Secondly, the life history interview offers a greater "guarantee" that the research topic represents a real interest not only for the researcher, but also for the service within the research that takes place and for the interviewee (Guarcello & Valenzano, 2019). The research conducted through life history interviews should in fact foresee a planning phase, carried out in partnership between the researchers, the commissionaires and the services involved in the research.

The plan allows the possibility for sharing themes, objectives and research methods, reflecting on the real interest that represents all the parties involved. If the commissionaires and the services are personally interested in the research topics, they can participate with greater effectiveness in the different phases of the research itself. At the same time, this partnership among the researchers, the commissionaires and the services must not violate the interviewees' right to privacy, keeping the strictest confidence on the relationship between the interviewees' identity and the interviews' contents.

Thirdly, the life history interview can make the narration experience not only a story of oneself but also an opportunity for learning and personal transformation (Mezirow, 2003, 2016). The narration of one's experience on a topic of interest and on which one feels a strong involvement is often an occasion for the interviewees to return to their past, immersing themselves in their own life experience, with a guide (researcher) who solicits reflection and at the same time, direction.

1 "The words biography and life history can also have quite distinct meanings. In Denmark, for instance (West et al., 2007), a distinction is drawn between biography or life story as the told life, and the life history, in which the researcher brings his or her interpretations and theoretical insights into play. This distinction has influenced biographical researchers in other countries (Roberts, 2002)" (Merrill, West, 2009, p. 10).

2 "Such as: 'Please tell me about your learning life history" (Merrill & West, 2012, p. 119).

This allows the interviewee to critically re-read their experience during narration and recognize the aspects that previously were not considered or were underestimated.

Often the interviewees, at the end of the interview, infer that being able to narrate their experience was an opportunity to understand it better, to re-order it and to become conscious of changes emerging with respect to their past. Often the life history interview is not just a story for the researcher, but a narration for learning and personal transformation of the interviewee.

Fourthly, the life history interview, even if it is an individual narration, always maintains a "mental" and "emotional" connection with that community which is involved in the research topic. The interviewee narrates on their own, but they feel part of a larger concept, and participate in a job that involves others like them who have had a similar experience (residential childcare community). For this reason, whenever possible, the interviewees usually show a particular interest in the possibility of meeting again as an entire group, having a reference with respect to the outcome of the analysis and interpretation of the interviews themselves.

Therefore, the life history interview can promote a "sense" of community expressed both through the sense of belonging to a community of people who possess an experience on a common theme (togetherness) and from the awareness that their own narration could be of help for the wider community of professionals and people who today, are going through that same experience.

Fifthly, the life history interview, precisely because of the aspects considered so far, allows the collection of narratives, that make it possible to better learn the topic of research, not only for speculative purposes but in order to improve the practice of services and to influence the policies that address that practice. The life history interviews offer an opportunity to work on the issue of residential childcare communities on multiple levels, intertwining them: the interpretative plan, the emancipatory plan, the transformative and political plan.

2. Influencing residential childcare practice and policy: biographical research experience

2.1 The research context: social service and residential childcare communities

During the period from November 2017 to May 2018, research was conducted in an area of Social Service in North West Italy, the C of I S (Consortium of Inter-Service), Turin (Orbassano), thanks to the interest of the Area Manager for Minors. Through life history interviews, the research involved people required to stay in residential childcare

communities. The research focused only on educational residential structures that welcome children for a period, for reasons related to serious difficulties experienced with family members (not due to psychiatric problems or serious personal illnesses). We have chosen this field of work because the residential interventions for the minors' protection are the biggest and most expensive social and educational interventions. However, the risks and the advantages of these interventions are rarely explored in depth.

The purpose of the study, was to combine three aspects: the understanding of the background of the interviewees with respect to a residential childcare community, the improvement of the professional documentation for the management of minors involved in these kinds of situations, and the contribution of the policy concept guidelines, relating to the management of out-of-home residential child care.

The study was conducted with a biographical approach through life history interviews, based on this initial incentive: "Walk us through, as far as you would like, your experience in the community and explain, how this experience has affected, for better or for worse, your current life".

The population within which the interviews were carried out was made up of 55 young people over 18 years old and adults who, when they were minors, lived in the territory of the C. I. of S. (Consortium of Inter-Service) and were placed by social workers into educational residences. In order to facilitate the interviewees' reflection regarding how the experience within educational residences has affected their current life, the researchers interviewed only the people released from educational residences at least two years before and so were born not earlier than 1997. An effort was made to trace and recruit these 55 young people and adults for an interview. Of those, 16 people were traced and were available to attend the interview.

The interviews were carried out in the environment of the interviewees' lives, in public places and at the social service facilities. The interviews were transcribed and afterwards sent to each interviewee, to eventually undergo any changes and to receive feedback on the subjective reactions to the reading of the paper (Atkinson, 1998).

The analysis of the interviews involved a systematic coding process (Coffey & Atkinson, 1996) aimed at comprehending three different aspects from the analysis which emerged. Firstly, the meaning subjectively attributed to the experience, the motives that underlay the necessity to distance participants from home and the procedures with which the operators had assured this distancing. Secondly, their relationships with the professionals who worked inside (educators) and outside the educational residence (social workers, psychologists, neuropsychiatrists, etc.), relationships with their fellow peers within the educational residence and the relationships with their biological family. Thirdly, the moment of release, the proposals for organizational improvement with respect to the management of the various aspects linked to one's own experience at an educational residence (Guarcello et al., 2018).

The open coding process allowed the identification of macro-thematic areas (summarized through a matrix of categories) and the detection of the frequencies of each category (represented through a double entry chart).

2.2 The research findings and the transformative proposals: from research to practice and policy.

The interviewees, 5 men and 11 women aged between 19 and 32 years old, were separated from home between the age of 5 and 17 years old and they spent from a minimum of 2 to a maximum of 14 years in one or more of the educational residences. Following the analysis, it emerged that professional intervention in residential childcare communities should work on consolidating three "structures": the emotional-relational category, the cognitive-operative category and the ethical-regulatory category.

The emotional-relational category can be consolidated across a re-elaboration of family problems that caused the rupture from home, the sense of belonging to a new community of adults and fellow peers and the strengthening of self-esteem and self-efficacy.

The cognitive-operative category can be consolidated across an individual's own perception of competence (knowledge) in managing scholastic, professional and day to day tasks.
The ethical-regulatory category can be consolidated across the participation of an orientation of values (experiences of justice, beauty, love, faith, …) and acceptance of clear, coherent, and constant community rules.

The professional intervention in residential childcare communities is characterized by an ecological interaction between emotional, cognitive and ethical levels. This ecological interaction helps the person to reconstruct the meaning of their experience in the community, potentially unifying some of the fragmentation and constructing an integrated view of life. The interviews also pointed out "discomfort zones" in respect to the experience in residential childcare communities. The "discomfort zones" represent three areas of practice that, according to interviewees, need to be

improved: management of admission, educational relationships, and the management of release. With respect to the role of management of admission in the residential structure, attention was focused on the experience of the "emotional ride" within a participant's own biological family. Despite the intense remembrance of the separation moment from home, all the interviewees, except one, believed that they understood the necessary reasons from leaving their household and, indeed, some pointed out that they had been hoping for some time that someone would have noticed their situation or malaise.

Although aware of the need to spend a period away from their biological family (because of their family problems), the interviewees indicate the importance of not being suddenly taken from home. The interviewees state that, every time it is possible, professionals should work with the children and the family in order to accompany the minor towards separation from the biological family.

With respect to the management of the educational relationship between professionals and minors, the interviewees stress the need for sufficient availability of time to dedicate to each minor, with personalized reports based on individual needs and therefore a fair treatment among different children. The professional's ability to recreate a "family" atmosphere is considered to be mostly positive and to affect the growth of minors and their well-being in such ways. According to the interviewees the "family" atmosphere is improved through relational modalities which are characterized by authoritativeness. From this perspective, on the one hand, the professional clarifies the rules of conduct, calls for the respect of the rules, punishing those who transgress. On the other hand, instead, the professional manifests a genuine interest toward the minor, taking care of them and explaining the meaning of those rules. Moreover the "family" atmosphere is promoted by a home's environment that is careful about details, comfortable and warm, reminding them of a common family home.

With respect to the management of release, the interviewees expressed the most critical issues since release had been experienced as a particularly difficult period. This experience is determined by lack of support in respect to reentry into the family of origin, or in starting a self-sustaining life in their own home. Interviewees strongly point out the need to think about professional assistance and accompaniment by professionals to the new residence, for an appropriate period, in order for the minor to feel confident that they can "get by on their own".

The transformative proposals, regarding the guidelines of professional assistance, have been deepened and discussed with a primary group of professionals. The work in a small group, across biographical interviews, has allowed professionals to have particular insights into one of various crucial experiences of the residential childcare community: the impact of the removal experience from home, which remained with interviewees even at a distance of time.

In the first place, the moment of removal (how, where and when it took place) is still a vivid and painful memory for the child, especially if it happened suddenly and abruptly.

Secondly, the removal from home has generated a profound fracture (almost always) between the interviewee and their biological family of origin. Before leaving the family, the family has often lived with a low level of awareness of their problems. This may improve thanks to the work of professionals, but not without difficulty.

Nevertheless, in third place, the interviewees were not always afforded a generous enough space to have the possibility to re-elaborate the relationship with their biological parents (across psychological or psychotherapeutic interventions), which remained an open wound (with manifestations of anger or overly desperate needs for reconciliation).

Biographical interviews have been an important experience both for the interviewee and the professional. In fact, the interviewees have revisited their experience, and an understanding of their own resources and critical problems they hadn't recognized before; and advancing new proposals to improve the life experiences of the people who actually live in the residential childcare communities. In this way the interviewees have enhanced their understanding regarding the impact of their experience both on personal life and on the life of minors who are currently coping with the same experience.

The professionals, after listening to the life histories of the interviewees, have increased their understanding on the out-of-home residential care experience. In this way the professionals have begun to reframe their meaning perspectives with regard to the impact of their work on the entire life of the minors, both when they are children and when they are adults.

It is precisely the extent of the impact that the experience of leaving home can have on the entire life of the interviewees, that proposals emerged in interviews to influence social policies in two different directions, which were already identified in the world of research but not yet widely practiced: home visiting and the care leaver's education and support.

Home visiting interventions (Pedrocco Biancardi, 2018), are part of residential care interventions that provide an interesting opportunity to avoid the distancing from the biological family. These interventions, to be effective, need to be structured based on objectives, contents, times and adequate modalities, and carried out with highly qualified educational and social personnel.

The interviewees of *care leavers education and support* (Murray, 2015) promote forms of support for care leavers following their exit from the residential structure in order to consolidate the progress achieved, thanks to the residential intervention and to support the integration of the teenager in every day community life, with clearer rationale and the possibility of greater autonomy.

Conclusions

Biographical interviews provided an opportunity for the interviewees to redefine and better understand the meaning and sense of their experience and to make it a resource of hope to help other children and professionals. In this sense, the biographical interview was an experience not only of raising important issues but also of togetherness.

Even the professionals, through the stories of the interviewees, experienced the same experience of togetherness. In fact, the stories helped generate new insights into experiences relating to the residential childcare communities, too often characterized by fears, anxieties and conflicts, both for minors and families and for the professional operators involved.

The togetherness that was generated, can contribute to improving the practice of residential childcare communities, to make them more "people-friendly" and more respectful of the dignity of everyone involved.

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