**Careleavers: from "vulnerable" children to autonomous adults? Effects of discourse in learning narratives**

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The system of welfare and social care constructs its own discourse with dominant representations, metaphors and narrations. Vulnerability is one of the “master stories” by which meaning and professional action are structured in children protection agencies. Children and young adults who enter these systems are often labelled “at risk” and positioned inside a dominant narration that begins with multi problematic families, passes through social intervention and school under-achievement, and points directly towards professional failure or low qualified careers. Their life trajectory is accompanied (“looked after”) by numbers of professionals (social workers, in home assistants, special educators, psychotherapists, etc. ) whose narratives and theories of “vulnerability” involve perspectives of meaning, scripts, and worldviews that are biased. How do different insiders of these processes develop a theory of their complexity and which forms of learning does it bring about?

How do these multiple narrations influence the development of an adult identity? Do they take the role of a reductionist self-fulfilling prophecy, or does it leave space for a more complex, less linear learning process?

The paper refers to a pilot study in Lombardy (Italy) where different kinds of data (qualitative and quantitative) were collected through questionnaires, interviews and focus group. Auto/biographic in-depth interviews were addressed to a small sample of careleavers – or “looked after” young people who grew up in children’s homes.

Our first findings confirm the dominant discourse involved in the process of identity building at macro, meso and micro levels (Author, 2009). During auto/biographical interviews, the participants positioned themselves in relation to received narration based on stigmatization, risk of failure and lack. They referred to “voices” in society and in the proximal systems (original family, children’s home, school, groups, community); they also chose, in some cases, to take a clear distance from those voices, addressing critically to professionals who were supposed to be protecting and educating them.

Auto/biographic methods (Merrill & West, 2009) create reflection and reflexivity, in the researchers and involved subjects; research can therefore be seen as a collaborative inquiry, not least around the struggle to findone’s own position in relationships with meaningful others. Narrations of careleavers and professionals working with them rich in theories, ambivalent feelings and sometime contradictory stancesCareleavers re-consider their past experiences, hence illuminating the learning processes embedded in living “under protection” for years. The huge investment of energies and resources to protect children, in case of abusing or negligent families, typical of contemporary times, has in fact created a system of intervention that produces learning, at many levels, but is this learning functional to freedom, self-direction, reflexivity, and a meaningful life? What are the conditions to create a good enough learning experience for these young adults (Reid & West, 2015), facing the passage from school to work, from protection to agency, from a ‘welfare life’ to self-direction and responsibility?

Besides, which kind of transitional spaces (West, & Carlson, 2007) were able to foster emancipatory learning? Which kind of guidance (Reid, 2016) – or other meaningful relationships – was offered to these young adults to allow what has been called “biographicity” (Alheit & Dausien, 2000), that is the possibility to develop a new script, a different identity/theory, or even a deep understanding of the action of social determinants in one’s life, so as to re-design it in more adaptive and meaningful terms?