

SUMMARY

CONFLICT AND CONTACT

An investigation into various possibilities for action open to child care workers when managing collisions and conflicts in daily life.

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Introduction

For child care workers in children's homes a daily task is to deal with collisions and conflicts in daily life. These incidents, according to the workers, have a strong influence on the atmosphere of the living group. Knowing how to manage these incidents is, in their opinion, important but difficult.

1. The literature

In a limited study of literature some authoritative writers in the field of youth care have been consulted. Their methodological approach about managing conflicts differ and the utility of these methods in daily practice is questionable. Thus the problem with which this investigation is concerned presents itself.

2. The problem of investigation

-By which process is it possible to develop a methodology which can be used for managing collisions and conflicts in daily life, and

-which methodology should be developed?

A 'methodology' is seen as a repertory of possibilities for action which can be argued as being correct, which are usable and fruitful and which can be chosen, performed and justified by the child care workers in daily life.

3. The fundamental vision

The visions within the field of special youth care are classified on the basis of the concepts 'behaviour' and 'action'.

-Those who choose '*behaviour*' as a basic concept, see man as a being whose behaviour is determined by laws or rules. Science is seen as obtaining objective knowledge of facts, laws, rules and methods to influence or control behaviour; ethical standards and values are beyond the limits of science.

-Those who choose, on the other hand, '*action*' as a basic concept, see man as a being who can act -that is: can give meaning, sets aims, standards and rules and can choose and justify methods. Science is seen as obtaining statements about the objective, inter-subjective and the subjective world, including ethical standards and values, which can be argued as valid. So human action can improve and man can be emancipated: set free from control.

In the field of special youth care we come across both visions.

a) Some people see the child and the adult only as behaving beings.

b) Other people see the adult as an acting being and the child as a behaving being, who can be influenced or controlled by effective intervention.

c) Other people see both the adult and the child as acting beings.

This last vision is the option chosen in this investigation, in accordance with the vision of the 'critical orthopedagogists'. These scientists in the field of special youth care aim to develop new possibilities for action, to broaden the horizon of current knowledge, to know how to act where others were at a loss.

4. Action research

This research tries to answer practical problems; it is based on the vision of man as an acting being. Its epistemology is set up by Moser, among other scientists; its foundation is the Critical Theory, especially Habermas' contribution.

Action research is performed with the field workers, who investigate their own situation, their course of action and their possibilities for better action. The targeted product of action research is the kind of knowledge: 'knowing how to act'.

Action research goes in a spiral-like process: acting in the field, gathering, processing and discussing data, developing ideas about improving the action, and then trying these out in the field. Then the cycle repeats itself.

The prototype of the data is the narrative about the course of action, as it is told by the actor. The core of the research cycle is the 'discourse': a regular discussion amongst all participants. In this discussion the validity of each statement can be judged on four criteria: factual truth, ethical correctness, genuineness and comprehensibility. These criteria are different from those of the positivistic behaviour research because the problem and the vision of man and science is different.

5. The method of research

To develop possibilities for action, the 'course of action' of the field workers had to be described, analysed and discussed. Thus the concept 'course of action' is unfolded in seven elements.

1. The way the situation is seen and interpreted.
2. The aims chosen.
3. The method of working.
4. The way the outcome is seen and interpreted.
5. The feeling afterwards.
6. The ideas and questions arisen.
7. The way to search for better courses of action.

The action 'doing research' was unfolded in a research cycle of seven steps, based on these seven elements. With the same seven elements the narratives of the child care workers could be described, analysed, compared and discussed. The workers were asked to explain their chosen courses of action in diaries. Processing these data included, among other things, analysing and comparison of the worker's narratives. Then the methodical ideas were discussed in discourse team sessions with the same workers. New approaches were tried out in the field by the child care workers, by students and by the author. The try-out was explained, analysed and discussed again in the spiral-like process, until the ideas were arguable as valid.

6. The first period of the project

In this period the research cycle was passed through by four teams of child care workers in living groups for teenagers. Each team started as a team, shortly after each other, and went through its own cycle for an average of twelve months.

The methodical ideas, developed and tried out with these four teams, were put together in a report, presented as an 'interim methodology for managing conflicts'.

The crux of this methodology is: do not think nor act in terms of *authority* during conflicts, but in terms of *contact*. The first course of action, 'authority', leads quickly to escalation and to a vicious circle of conflicts. The second course of action, 'contact', gives a greater opportunity to resolve conflicts. A third course of action, 'avoiding conflicts', is advised against, because it implies avoiding contact, and so nothing can be resolved.

7. The second period of the project

The interim methodology was then, in different ways, presented to the teams of seven other living groups for children, youth and adults. So the interim methodology was tried out and at the same time developed further. In this period the research method was in essence the same: each team passed through the same cycle, now for an average of seven months.

Five of these teams changed their course of action in the trend of the interim methodology; two teams did not. The interim methodology turned out to be usable and problem solving, as long as one would work with it and could share the fundamental vision.

8. The third period of the project

This is the period after the fieldwork was done; now only the author continued the research. The data from the seven teams were again studied, connected and compared.

The concepts which were occurred during the project were critically examined, specified and described. Now -among other things -it was possible to analyse the narrated courses of action in increasing degrees of abstraction. These courses of action could be classified in three categories, *three prevalent courses of action*, named as follows.

I CONTROLLING BEHAVIOUR, thus winning conflicts.

II MEETING WITH THE PERSON, thus resolving conflicts, maintaining the contact.

III AVOIDING THE CONFLICT, thus creating distance.

Each of these prevalent courses of action could be described with the seven elements mentioned above.

Then the final result of the investigation could be formulated:

-the theoretical framework, a series of basic concepts,

-a normative theory about managing collisions and conflicts, and

-a methodology about managing collisions and conflicts in daily life.

9. The methodology

The methodology is made up of the three prevalent courses of action and of a recommendation for preference. The three courses of action are, limited to the advisable part, summarized on a special form, a triptych, presented on the last page of this summary .

Course of action number II, 'meeting with the person' , has been given in full on the central panel; the recommendation is to give preference to this course and to base one's work on it. The second in preference is course of action number III, 'avoiding the conflict'; this course has been put on a side panel in limited form, limited to the advisable part. The recommendation is: recognise that it is sometimes necessary to avoid the conflict, but do not choose this as a standard procedure.

The last in preference is course of action number I, 'controlling behaviour'; this course has been put on the other side panel in more limited form, limited to the advisable part. The recommendation is: choose this course temporarily, and only when absolutely necessary , under the condition that course number II be seen as the desired and the standard action to which must be returned. ,

This methodology, which is developed in a certain population of clients, is not to be used to give the instruction: 'This is our method from now on' .Rather the utility of this method should be seen in its being a fruitful starting point for a discussion about a methodology specified for this team and its clients.

10. Special youth care, an action oriented science

If the results of this project -the concepts, the theory and the methodology -can be judged as valid (that is: factually true, ethically correct, genuine and comprehensible), then there is another result: a method shown to be usable for the development of a methodology.

Using this method implies taking a direction: placing the narrative of the child care worker (parent, foster parent, etc.) first, and critically discussing these narratives with the same workers (parents etc.). This is the direction of the action research and thus the direction of the fundamental vision which, as we have seen, is the action oriented. This implies no longer viewing the way of the positivistic behaviour oriented research and its fundamental vision as the only correct one.

Another direction is taken too: placing the message of the child first, even if this message is given by the child being a pest. This implies taking this message seriously and respectfully recognising it. So one takes the child seriously as an acting being, a young person.

If one makes contact with this young person and really meets with him or her in daily life, one shall come across collisions and conflicts. If one manages these events in the method presented, one can make contact and really meet with the person. Then the residential child care workers can do their work: knowing how to act where others did not. The team can offer living space to the young person, who may occasionally be a pain in the neck, and the team can share daily life with him or her -by means of conflict and contact.

Three possibilities for acting in case off collisions and conflicts

	CONTROLLING BEHAVIOUR <i>(and win conflict if necessary)</i>	MEETING WITH THE PERSON <i>(solve conflict with keeping contact)</i>	AVOIDING THE CONFLICT <i>(create distance)</i>
1. INTERPRETATION	Unwanted behaviour, interpreted out of rules and seen from a distance.	Act as a person, an ego. Important information in the 'dark side'.	Interpretation out of fear and inability or practical reasons.
2. AIM	Controlling behaviour and win conflict .	Meet the person and solve conflict with keeping contact.	Avoiding the conflict and create distance.
3. METHOD	Use functional authority to control behaviour, thus managing the rules and guide behaviour on certain lines.	Making contact with the person, including his 'dark side' as a person in shared living situation. Communication adequately, especially about evidently important messages, including those from the 'dark side'. Give space to be a person and to ask for help. Unconditional care. If necessary daring the confrontation and entering the conflict, aiming to maintain the contact, thus communicating adequately. Using authority moderately: only to make contact and to resolve the conflict.	Controlling and withholding oneself. Veiling. Postponing. Keeping off. Reacting neutralizing.
4. OUTCOME	Temporary rest. Fake adaptation. Escalation. Breaks in the interaction. Vicious circle. Fighting relationship	Improved contact. Conflicts resolvable. Real rest. Signals for help become visible. The group is lively, but not chaotic. Mutual predomination decreases.	Temporary rest. Communication is difficult. Conflict comes again.
5. FEELINGS AFTERWARDS	Satisfaction. Tension. Doubt. Impotence.	Difficult. Tired, but usually satisfied.	Breathing space. Tension. Fear.
6. IDEAS	Interpretation as behaviour confirmed.	Contact is advisable aim. Conflict can realise contact. One learns to know oneself and ones group. One asks for methodology to help the clients.	Avoiding conflict implies avoiding contact. This course works only temporarily.
7.WAY TO SEARCH	More effective control techniques.	Developing ones own methodology self. Listening to the clients.	Looking for support from others

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Three possibilities for acting in case off collisions and conflicts

	CONTROL	MEETING WITH THE PERSON	AVOIDING
1.INTERPRETATION			
2.AIM			
3. METHOD			
4. OUTCOME			
5. FEELINGS AFTERWARDS			
6. IDEAS			
7.WAY TO SEARCH	.		

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