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Workshop 22. September 2008, 15.00 – 16.00 o'clock.**

Identity Formation and life courses of foster children or the creative solutions for living together in foster families

In the years between 2001 and 2005 we had the opportunity to do intensive research on identity building and the development of socializing abilities and resilience by foster children at the Institute for Sociology of the Friedrich-Schiller University, Jena¹. The research was conducted in the scopes of two projects that were sponsored by the Deutschen Forschungsgemeinschaft (DFG). The monographs of both research projects have been published by the VS-Verlag for social science in April 2008 (Walter Gehres; Bruno Hildenbrand: Identitätsbildung und Lebensverläufe bei Pflegekindern, 148 pages, 29,90 Euro).

In this workshop I will present central findings, conclusions and the research approaches we took in both studies. Details and the complete body of case-monographs can be found in our own monograph.

Central Results

The following central characteristics of socialization in foster families show themselves independent of personal orientation, bonding preferences, motivations of the people in the foster family, the environment the foster family lives in, and similar factors:

(1)

The constant struggle for the normalisation of the growing-up process in “as-if” mode. This means that foster parents usually live with their “alien” children as if they were related by blood. The fiction of the “as-if” is a creative way for the parents to come to terms with the central and existential challenges that come with the decision to take in, and the subsequent life with, a foster child. This includes first and foremost the dealing with (1) shared parenthood and its indivisibility as well as (2) the structural characteristics that are inherent in families. Among those are:

- the impossibility to exchange the personnel of birth families
- a lifelong connection as basis for the relationship
- an erotic solidarity (the blood relation between child and parents and the exclusion of the child from the erotic)
- an affective and total solidarity (durable relationship and a high degree of mutual trust; further reading Gehres/Hildenbrand 2008, 22ff.; Parsons 1964).

¹

The head of the project was Prof. Dr. Bruno Hildenbrand.

Foster families don't show any of these qualities as basis for their relationship, even though they usually develop distinct characteristics for themselves over the course of their relationship (cf. ebenda, 25).

Just because foster families are artificial constructs does not mean that their actions are artificial as well. On the contrary they managed to create a rational situation designed for every day life, which would be impossible to achieve outside the, albeit temporary, fiction of the "as-if". The more foster parents are aware of this fiction, the sooner they can use this life practice in order to enable their child to gather alternative experiences without being forced to deny its family of origin or coming into a conflict of loyalty.

(2)

The experiences foster parents make with social disintegration, alienation, change of milieu, reorientation in their own history and the solving of these problems can further facilitate the stability and the resilience potential of the whole family. Coincidentally, these biographic experiences resemble those of the foster children's milieu of origin (similar structural experiences).

(3)

The development of an unconditional solidarity for the time being. The initially foreign child is accepted into the family and guaranteed a high amount of trust and affection. This happens without any expectations on the part of the foster parents of receiving something in return and despite the limited duration of the foster relationship.

The concept of the foster family as a „family sui generis“ (family of its own kind)

Because of these profound results we propose a new concept of foster parenthood, namely that the foster family is to be understood, not as a substitute or a supplement, but as a **“family sui generis”** (**“family of its own kind”**). A foster family is a social unit whose central achievement is to provide the foster child, in its socialisation practice – in comparison to the milieu of its origin – with alternative experiences in accessing and dealing with family boundaries in opposition to other social environments and birth families, triadic structures and affective frameworks. The foster parents are required, in their own interest, to arrange their cohabitation in contrast to their social environment, even their families of origin. Furthermore they need to provide their child with the ability to in- and exclude itself within the boundaries of the triad (e.g. structure providing mother and emotionally cushioning father or vice versa) as well as contributing to the construction of a durable relationship and thus giving their foster child a feeling of security.

With this, the foster family will become a social environment in which foster children can build up resilience potential and learn how to apply it in everyday life. Especially those resources of foster children will be enhanced, which allow them to accept the alternative socialization offered by the foster family without having to deny either of their two families (foster and origin) as part of their identity.

Conclusions for the praxis

Through their actions foster parents are capable of directly influencing the development of foster children and increase their potential resilience. This is usually successful if they:

- deal with family boundaries, relationship structures and affective bonding within the foster family in a flexible and reflecting way

- arrange the cohabitation with the foster child in such a way, as if family structures would be valid for this factual family as well: socialisation in the mode of the “as-if”
- cooperate with the milieu of origin and make resources from that origin accessible to the foster child
- use the milieu as a realm of experience in order to help the foster child in developing its identity

Research approach and Sample

Initial position

The foster family is an inconsistent construct in such a way, that the family-like social relationships have to be organised on the basis of a service contract.

Questions

The central concern of our research is to understand the complex processes that are associated with growing up in a foster family and at the same time to contribute to the formulation of theories. In detail this includes the reconstruction of the biographical development of former foster children as well as dealing with the discovery of connections that cultivate the identity building processes and the capacity to act in foster children. For us the process of building an identity is considered successful if the foster child is able to accept the course of his life – despite having experienced ambivalence, contradiction, heterogeneousness – and is outfitted with resources that allow the child to think and act independently.

Method and Sample

The empirical basis for the studies is basically made up of six contrastive case-reconstructions of former foster children. The participants are of both genders and were at the beginning of the study between 21 and 31 years old. The data is supplemented with the analysis of (1) a round of experts and (2) a group discussion that consists of former foster children, blood related children of foster parents, adopted children and children who are still living in a foster family.

The central challenge in reconstructing a case is to identify the characterising patterns of acting and coping in the socialisation process of a specific case and to do so from various perspectives. The two pivotal analysis techniques are:

the analysis of the genogram of both the family of origin as well as the foster family in order to determine the initial conditions stemming from their life story and generative background (more on this technique cf. Hildenbrand 2005).

the hermeneutic sequence analysis in order to determine the case defining structures and patterns of action.

The result of this evaluation and the analysis of the genogram is the formulation of a case-structure-hypothesis (further information on this cf. Gehres/Hildenbrand 2008, 26ff; Hildenbrand, 2004).

These results are formulated as a hypothesis because future biographic developments or additional data sources may require a review of the present case structure.

A „case“ is not only made up of the former foster child, but also at least of its last foster family, its family of origin, other important attachment figures from its childhood and the youth welfare system. For each reconstructed case exist at least two kinds of interviews:

- an narrative interview with the last foster family including the former foster child regarding their family history
- a one-on-one narrative interview with the former foster child

On average, three interviews per case were conducted over the course of our research. In one case (Pia) we had access to interviews with a total of five attachment figures from the history of her socialisation.

We reconstructed the previous life courses of six cases which were Pia (27), Jakob (30), Dieter (38), Gabriele (31), Christoph (29) and Lukas (31). The age of the subjects is noted here, as it was in the year 2008.

The selection of the cases was carried out by theoretical sampling, by a contrastive selection on the basis of the theoretical findings that emerge during research. This means that we start by selecting and analysing the first case. Then we use the results from our first case in order to select the next case, on the premise that it is the most contrasting one compared to the first case. Then we proceed by analysing the thus selected case. This process is continued until there are no more new findings resulting from the analysis (for more on this cf. Gehres/Hildenbrand, ebenda, 35).

The goal of the practice of enquiry was to use various data sources for the analysis and not to follow a strict schema. That is why, for the case reconstruction of Dieter Werner for example, state welfare office records from the 1980s and today could be taken into consideration.

Conclusion

Our method allows a process perspective on the changes in socializing developments over the course of more than six years. Time and again, over the course of our research, we had contact with the former foster children as main study participants, sometimes even to the former foster parents. Because of this we were able to observe the further biographic developments up until 2007 and take them into consideration during the process of creating our theory.

Bibliography:

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