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Social Psychology and Social Pedagogy: Their Interdisciplinarity in Group Counselling for Parents

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THEORY

PRACTICE

RESEARCH

Nowadays Greece faces multiple transitions and difficulties at financial, social and interpersonal level. Undoubtedly family counselling offers help and support to deal with various problems raised within family and school contexts. Since 1998, the Ministry of Education and Religion has provided supportive counselling to families free of charge through the programme Parents' Schools. Specialists from different fields (psychologists, pedagogues, social workers) participate as coordinators of parents' groups. The application is based on basic notions of the field of social psychology, systemic theory and social pedagogy. The current paper focuses on the presentation of family counselling in Greece and the description of the interdisciplinary approach between social psychology and social pedagogy in the methodology of Parents' Schools.

Key words: social psychology, social pedagogy, group counselling for parents.

Introduction

The family is a small social system that changes through the life span. During the family life cycle, the roles of the members and the functions of the family alter. That means that important events in family life (marriage, birth, divorce, death etc.), such as changes in the social context, influence not only the social system but also the school system, the immediate community, the family and the individuals. Over the last five years, Greek families have had to cope with the financial crisis in many different fields. Unemployment rates being at their highest, many family members have lost their job while they have to cover the needs of their family. Parents very often feel helpless, alone and anxious. According to systems theory, if a family member experiences negative feelings, the other members are influenced too, since family members interact and depend on each other (Baron et al., 2013; Giotsa, 2010, 2014; Giotsa et al., 2011).

In order to help parents to be better guardians especially in times of crisis, many institutions and the Greek Ministry of Education and Religion have developed Parents' Schools (Georgiou &

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Kotsakis, 2008). In Parents' Schools, we offer parents the knowledge, confidence and strength they need to cope with their children's needs and help them understand how they can support their children.

The evolution of Counselling for Parents in Greece

During the sixties in Greece, Maria Chourdaki founded the first Parents' School. The work in Parents' Schools was based on the principles of the International Federation for Parent Education (1962). The contribution of Maria Chourdaki in the field of family counselling was very important, as she focused on group dynamics and emphasized children's developmental changes while they grow up. Parents had to acquire knowledge of the developmental characteristics of a child during a specific stage in order to control their fears and anxiousness about the behaviour of their children (Chourdaki, 2000).

In the public sector, the Ministry of Education and Religious Affairs founded the programme Parents' Schools, supported by the Institution of Youth and Lifespan Education (Giotsa et al., 2011). The Parents' Schools is a programme free of charge and open to all, regardless of nationality, age, family status, educational level and religion. The main aim of the programme is to support people in their parental role by offering them the opportunity to learn and to exchange experiences and ideas with other parents. To be more specific, the Parents' Schools programme aims to:

- Improve communication in the family field;
- Refine communication in the family and school contexts;
- Convey scientific knowledge of child development stages;
- Prevent children's violent and delinquent behaviours;
- Encourage parents to get involved in their children's school life and to collaborate better with teachers;
- Help parents to support their children and themselves to adapt in transitions concerning the school context (such as entering into a new school environment, into primary or secondary school etc.) or transitions in the family life (birth of another child, movement, separation, loss of a relative, the empty nest etc.).

Parents participating in Parents' Schools have the opportunity to choose between the following different subjects:

1. Contemporary Family (50 hours)
2. Contact between school and family (50 hours)
3. Stereotypes in the family (25 hours)
4. Counselling for parents of children with special needs (25 hours)
5. Relationships between genders (25 hours)
6. Career counselling (25 hours)
7. Counselling for older people (25 hours)
8. Counselling for vulnerable people (25 hours)
9. Use of new technologies (25 hours)
10. Utilize free time in the family (25 hours)
11. Nutrition and physical exercise (25 hours)

Methodology of group counselling for parents

The duration of group counselling for parents varies from 25 to 50 hours per group. The meetings are held weekly or every second week. Group counselling for parents is a small social group where

individuals can share common goals and interests concerning child-rearing practices, interacting, and influencing each other's behaviour. As in any group, both the coordinator and the parents apply and follow common norms, which are implicit or explicit rules that apply to all members of the group and govern acceptable behaviours and attitudes (Baron et al., 2013). Topics are raised by both the group members and the coordinator depending on the needs, interests, context and circumstances. During the whole process of the meetings, other topics could be included too (Giotsa, 2010, 2014; Giotsa et al., 2011).

The methodology and the implementation of group counselling for parents in Greece are focused on the basic notions of social psychology and social pedagogy. In this context, other programmes, such as syneducation programmes, are being developed in Greece with the aim to expand the philosophy of group counselling for parents and include children's training at the same time and in collaboration with their parents. The origin of the word syneducation comes from the two Greek terms synergy and education and refers to a shared educational experience that is acquired at same time and in collaboration by people of different ages (i.e. parents and children), different knowledge, experiences, interests and/or different social cultural background (Mylonakou & Kekes, 2005, 2007; Mylonakou-Keke, 2008).

The application of social psychology in parent counselling groups

The field of social psychology spans the boundary between the disciplines of different fields of psychology (developmental and counselling psychology) and has traditionally been associated with other scientific fields and empirical research. In the other scientific fields, social pedagogy could be included, and in empirical research many studies of human behaviour have been conducted in education.

Research on parent counselling in Greece includes many different approaches (Bassioti et al., in press; Chourdaki, 2000; Giotsa, 2010, 2014; Mylonakou-Keke, 2008; Mylonakou-Keke et al., 2014). There are many basic notions taken from the fields of social psychology and social pedagogy that are applied to the methodology of group counselling for parents. These notions include values and principles of the application of general systems theory to families and their connection with the community. The common basic principles, notions and methodologies are organised and reformulated at a higher level, highlighting the potential of interdisciplinarity between social psychology and social pedagogy.

General systems theory in parent counselling groups

In 1940, von Bertalanffy developed General Systems Theory in an effort to apply a systemic approach to the social sciences. Two of the basic principles of systemic theory are that a system is defined as a complex of elements in interaction and that the whole of the group is greater than the sum of its parts. According to systems theory, the maintenance of a system depends on the interactions between the system and the environment and on the openness of the boundaries (von Bertalanffy, 1972). It is very important that a system is flexible to adapt to new circumstances and open to new information from the environment (Carr, 2000).

Systems theory is applied in parent counselling groups. In this context, parent counselling takes into account not an isolated behaviour but the interactions between family members and an individual's interaction with other subsystems such as the family and school systems, the professional context etc. (Asen, 2002; Giotsa et al., 2011; Lundvall, 2010). More specifically, families

are considered 'complicatedly organized, resistant and continuous systems of interrelated elements' (Goldenberg & Goldenberg, 2005, p. 72). Consequently, in parent counselling groups the focus is on the relational processes (Larner, 2004) and the relationships between group members and family members and not on the personal attributes of every member separately (Goldenberg & Goldenberg, 2005).

Another concept utilized in group counselling is *boundaries*. Boundaries can differentiate a system from other subsystems and define the amount of contact between members and systems (Carlile, 2002; Dallos & Draper, 2010). Families could be open or closed systems. Open systems remain constant over time, but processes are going on and promote simultaneously the development of the individuals and of the whole system. An open family system is flexible to adapt to new circumstances, to receive, share and flow information to and from the environment. In parent counselling groups the coordinator helps the members to build effective and clear boundaries in their families, which means that families intentionally open and close their boundaries when they think it is beneficial for them.

In parent counselling groups there is also *equifinality*, an important element of open systems (Dallos & Drapper, 2010; Kunda, 2001; Von Bertalanffy, 1950). Equifinality in parents' groups means that, through experiential exercises, the coordinator could help parents change their attitudes and behaviour towards their children, to build effective boundaries and to establish emotional connections with others. This is attained in different ways such as exercises, dialogue, interaction and exchange of experiences among the members. Another basic notion we take into account in the application of systems theory in parent counselling groups is *homeostasis*. The homeostatic process demands a period of change followed by times of consolidation to accommodate the transition (Goldenberg & Goldenberg, 2005; Lundvall, 2010; Von Bertalanffy, 1950). Groups faced by a transition and change in the system attempt to maintain homeostasis in order to avoid disequilibrium in different ways and to regain the old situation, such as the symptoms of a member of the family.

The application of social pedagogy in group counselling for parents

Many concepts, principles and values of social pedagogy can be applied in parent counselling groups. Concerning the nature of parent counselling groups supported by the Ministry of Education and Religion in Greece, we can assert that it is a lifelong learning programme, designed to enable people to take part in stimulating learning experiences at any stage of their life, as well as developing education and training (European Commission, 2014). From the field of social pedagogy, we can use the following notions concerning the *main goals* of parents' group counselling.

Parents' Schools are addressed at parents or future parents of all ages, regardless of their cultural background, religion, educational or financial level. They are free of charge, and people from vulnerable groups (Roma, prisoners and parents of children with special needs) can also participate in groups. More specifically, the Greek Ministry of Education and Religion has set up special counselling groups for immigrants in Greece, for Roma people and for prisoners (for men and women separately) in order to support these vulnerable groups to deal with the difficulties and transitions in their lives. The work in parent groups combines theory with experiential learning in order to help parents build stronger relationships between every family member and help them to work together as a team. The systemic approach is also applied from a social pedagogical perspective. Working with parents aims to evolve and develop children at a social, emotional and cognitive level in the long term, by utilising interconnections and strengthening relations.

At *individual and group level*, participating in parent groups helps parents to develop skills of interpersonal communication, to respect other people and to promote dialogue in the family; these are important priorities for social pedagogy (Mylonakou-Keke, 2009; Petrie, 2011). Moreover, it is very important to cultivate empathy in the family between generations and to teach people to respect the diversities. A very useful notion from systemic theory is the use of positive reframing. According to Mylonakou-Keke (2013), from a social pedagogical perspective diversity is considered as any otherness, thus each person's uniqueness. That means that the focus is on the positive aspect of the diversities in order to help people feel unique 'in the system' and not excluded 'out of the system'. Participants in parent groups learn to communicate effectively and improve their interpersonal communication skills in the family system. The work with systems allows the coordinator of the group to identify the patterns of interpersonal communication emerging in the parent group and to expand this vision to the family system. Working with parents is based also on *experiential learning* (Giotsa, 2010; 2014). The power of experiential activities is undoubtedly very strong and is reflective of the Chinese proverb 'Tell me and I'll forget; show me and I may remember; involve me and I'll understand'. Albert Einstein also said that 'I never teach my pupils; I only attempt to provide the conditions in which they can learn'. Through experiential exercises the group leader/coordinator helps parents to learn how they can collaborate with other members and to develop problem solving skills.

So, apart from the direct connection between theory and practice that both disciplines are interested in, social psychology and social pedagogy can be practised throughout a person's life and are interested in training and continuously supporting people on the way to their welfare and well-being. Another field common to social psychology and social pedagogy is the connection with the immediate community. Parent groups are organized and supported by the community, parent associations, school counsellors and school principals. Attendance is open to all social groups, and special counselling groups are also offered to vulnerable people (Lee, 1979).

Connection of group counselling for parents with the community

The development and organisation of groups is being supported in each region by the Centres for Lifelong Learning, the Second Chance Schools, the Associations of Popular Training, Primary and Secondary Education Directives, Parent Associations, communities etc. Since 2004, more than 35,000 parents and future parents have participated in the groups. There are also connections with other structures of Lifelong Learning Programmes in Greece, like the Second Chance Schools and the Centres for Lifelong Learning, in case that a person needs to be provided with information concerning other skills and/or educational and professional needs. In the case of immigrants, they can take Greek language courses free of charge (Georgiou & Kotsakis, 2008).

Discussion

The aim of this article was to describe the principles of group counselling for parents functioning in Greece during the last decade. Another aim was to describe the interdisciplinary approach between social psychology and social pedagogy in the methodology of Parents' Schools. In recent years, the Greek Ministry of Education and Religion has been strongly promoting the collaboration between the family, the school system and the community, aiming to deal effectively – through this collaboration – with a great number of social pedagogical issues with the aid of social psychology.

At a European and international level parent training constitutes an indispensable presupposition for the best adaptation in the education system (Georgiou, 2013). The development of parent

groups in Greece promotes the connection between different subsystems, such as the individual, the family, and the immediate community in a specific ecological context (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). Greece is the only country in European and at international level which (through the Ministry of Education and Religion) has offered training free of charge to its population (both immigrants and natives) for a long period (since 1998). There are parent groups in every region, in every community in Greece. People from different age groups, regardless of race, religion, beliefs, social and professional background take advantage of these parent groups. Counselling for parents helps people build stronger interpersonal relationships with their relatives in the nuclear and extended family. It is very important for Greek people to have the opportunity to participate in parent groups, because family constitutes an important institution for them. For example, elderly people find a new group to join, vulnerable populations profit from this opportunity and gradually start to feel more accepted and less excluded by the social system. The Greek Ministry of Education and Religion supports the interdisciplinary approach in the application of the groups, promoting the involvement of different specialists in the leaderships of groups. Group leaders have to support vulnerable and other people through a systemic approach in order to acquire communication and problem-solving skills.

Through the application and interaction of their basic principles and methodologies social psychology and social pedagogy are proven to be fruitful for the accomplishment of the goals of group counselling for parents. General systems theory is a helpful framework for working with parents in groups and understanding interaction and communication processes within the group and family systems. Coordinators have the role of the boundary regulator and the leader who teaches parents how to be more effective and build close relationships with the other members of the family by developing and expanding the emotional and communication skills of all members of the family.

The interdisciplinary approaches of social psychology and social pedagogy in the parents counselling field could open a new area of theory and research, broaden the horizons of the group counselling and strengthen the connections between families, school and communities.

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