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## **SELF-KNOWLEDGE AND PROFESSIONAL IDENTITY**

The paper discusses the role of self-knowledge in career socialization and presents a constructivist approach to its development, explicitly rejecting what are known as the profession model and the science and technology model in favor of a critical-interpretive approach, on which individuals are viewed as active organizers and interpreters of their own knowledge. These capacities enable them to construct and deal, within their framework, with their own internal world. The paper argues that role construction is part of a highly individual process in which everyone constructs their own understanding of the world they live in. Since conceptual change and cognitive changes are an integral part of this process, the principal goal of integrating the development of students' self-knowledge in the higher-education process is precisely to bring about conceptual change. Research is oriented toward a development program that can be integrated in social and teacher education.

*Keywords:* self-knowledge, career socialization, constructivism, the construction, definition and interpretation of roles, conceptual change, professional identity, teacher education.

Publications reporting work on students' self-knowledge in higher education institutions in Hungary are available in the psychological as well as the pedagogical literature. Our contribution to the field is the description of a new model in the present work, in which students of education and students of social psychology were involved.

### **Theoretical Considerations**

The understanding of expectations relating to the work, role, education, and personality of teachers (and helpers) is intimately tied to various existing pedagogical paradigms. These paradigms will mainly differ from one another in terms of the answers they give to the following questions: Education is done on the basis of what general conceptualization of a human being or personality? What is education itself? What is understood by

educability? What should teacher education be based on? How is the concept of knowledge understood? How are pedagogic roles interpreted? etc. Different teacher education models offer different answers to these questions.

In our work, we explicitly reject what are known as the profession model and the science and technology model, because we find it hard to identify with its underlying anthropological conviction which adopts an interpretation of learner roles that assigns a passive role to learners, rejecting their activity and autonomy. We consider a critical-interpretive model superior, which assumes a conceptualization of a human being on which an individual is viewed as an active organizer and interpreter of their own knowledge, who can deal with their autonomous world within their own interpretive framework. This conceptualization of a human being is consistent with general constructivist assumptions about human personality, knowledge, and learning.

The constructivist approach we prefer to assume is more in line with Habermas's critique of Parsons's structure-functionalist theory of roles. In Parsons's view (quoted in Kron 2003), the congruence of role expectations and the individual's position as defined by their needs are a precondition for their social integration. This assumes externally controlled individuals. Habermas (1971, quoted in Kron 2003) attributes more differentiated functions to the carriers of roles (individuals). He recognizes internal control, since – as he puts it – definitions of roles are not to be assumed as given either by the system or by the acting individual and, in addition, the equivalence between role definitions and role interpretations is rare in reality – in fact, they are more often different rather than identical. This is what he calls the discrepancy theorem, which may be used to determine the extent of the difference. Individuals produce self-accomplishments that interact with each other, which leads to multiple role interpretations. In other words, roles are constantly redefined. Role definition, therefore, is a constructive process that takes external experience into account, but the individual's behavior and actions are internally controlled. An educational program may assist students in professional role acquisition by providing an appropriate learning environment in which students can construct their professional roles for themselves.

The dominance of the cognitive approach was to be perceived in several related sciences in the middle of the twentieth century. A new paradigm has emerged, which is represented, among others, by Karl Popper, Thomas Kuhn, and Noam Chomsky (cf. Popper 1997, Kuhn 1984, Chomsky 1995). The constructivist approach to cognition is opposed to the view that knowledge is the product of some process of reflection.

Constructivism does not seek any match between knowledge and reality, because it does not believe that knowledge may be evaluated as either true or false. As Nahalka (1997) puts it, “according to constructivism, knowledge is the result of construction, whereby a human being constructs for themselves an internal world which organizes, integrates, and interprets their experience. This internal world enables the individual to make specific predictions about future states of affairs in the real world. A very important function of this internal model of the world is to process, interpret, and systematically integrate the information the cognizing individual encounters. This is exactly what we call learning.”

Pléh (1999) expresses a similar view, stating that “not only science is understood as a model construction activity, but human cognition in general has been assumed for the past thirty or forty years in several sciences, such as psychology, ethology, linguistics, and computer science, to be a kind of model construction work, which is the central defining feature of human beings.”

A lot remains to be understood about models as representations of knowledge and the process of model construction. Yet, the important point for us is that constructivism interprets emotions, human relations, information intake and processing within a framework of model construction.

Our goal in doing work on students’ self-knowledge is to bring about conceptual changes. Conceptual change is understood to be a change of elements that constitute the structure of an information processing system. The purpose of developing students’ self-knowledge is to differentiate their understanding of their own personality.

In addition to the analytic specification of basic principles and concepts, we employed the technique of cross-mapping of knowledge domains in order to achieve conceptual change. Thus, a characteristic feature of this approach is the special source of information, personality itself, and the role it plays in processing information. We adopt the general assumption that certain domain specific information processing structures are innate and that these are the foundation on which successive development is based (Nahalka 1997). New information is integrated into these structures through conceptual changes. We also adopt the assumptions that prior structures and their essential traits coexist with modified structures, and that individuals naturally resist these changes.

Research is oriented toward a development program that can be integrated in social and teacher education.

## **The Program**

Inasmuch as group work throughout the program was based on data from the participants' own life histories, it was similar to standard self-knowledge or personality development programs. However, our program was admittedly different in important ways from traditional approaches. Analysis was always crucially determined by (our understanding of) the central elements of the profession.

Knowledge acquired in the sessions always identifies a particular domain in the range of activities defined by the profession chosen by the students. The stories that participants tell about themselves are important for the continuity, unity, integration, and identity of their selves.

It is made explicit that an important purpose of the sessions is to develop students' professional identity, by sharing stories with group members. Meetings were organized on a regular basis, in order to reduce the likelihood of relapse.

Our original intention was to relax group boundaries and allow a closed group structure to open up, in order to replace the artificial world of a closed group by a sort of group life that is more like the real world. This was motivated by considering that, because life in organizations is variable, students would need to be able to develop their own strategies of how to adapt to new community members, colleagues and leaders in schools as well as social work. However, the structural and operational constraints of the higher education institutional context (scheduling, shortage of classrooms, etc.) interfered, and, as a result, the groups remained closed.

## **Group Work Methods**

The first step we took was to adapt Rational Emotional Therapy to the goals and needs of our program. The therapeutic process, originally worked out by Waters (1982), based on work by Ellis, was adapted to young people with normal life patterns, though undergoing field change. This is an active, direct approach that focuses on converting adaptationally unproductive thoughts, emotions, and behaviors to productive ones. It makes specific assumptions about emotional disturbances and the nature of health. It assumes that emotions are not directly caused by real-world situations but by people's perceptions and interpretations of those situations. Thus, since people create their own emotions, they should be able to learn ways to control them, rather than the other way round.

The central theme of group sessions is to facilitate cognitive changes. This presupposes students learning to be able to listen to their inner talk and

come to understand what they know about themselves and about the processes that occur in them. For a detailed analysis and presentation of the process, see Szebeni (2004).

What emerges in this first phase is a texture of life histories, situations, emotions, and beliefs, which serves as the foundation for work that follows in the next phase. The emotional process of detachment from the parents, principles of professional role preferences, and various ways of resolving social conflicts are clarified. What happens here is a kind of “figure transformation”, a sort of closure, where instances of incompleteness are replaced by a sense of completeness. Group members’ irrational beliefs become real, since they are legitimized by members re-experiencing them. This explains why there is no need to employ what are called reality tests in this kind of work. What might be explored, however, is the question of how various constructs support its viability. It is not explicitly communicated in the general theory, i.e. constructivism, what sorts of input guarantee major changes in cognitive structures. We hypothesize that the substance of participants’ life histories and the concomitant inner stimuli contribute to an elaboration of their mental structures.

The second major phase of work in the group was the exploration of values (Szilágyi 1997). This brings to the surface value-related cognitive contents. Patterns of value organization are made explicit, allowing the group leader to identify areas where members experience problems in the world and segments of reality where they possess little self-knowledge. In such cases the group leader adjusted the stories to the group.

Our experience suggests that early on in the process, students tend to be more active and more sensitive to decision-making situations that arise in partnership relations and in the family, and are less involved in professional issues. This was evidenced by various student behaviors: they either played a situation down, or closed too soon, or simply did not perceive a highlighted situation as a challenge to make a decision.

### **Summary**

What we have described is a possible way of preparing students for the teaching profession, which, we feel we have reason to believe, ensures better professional development and more successful professional self-accomplishment. The continuous elaboration of experiences through work on various life histories triggers changes in the personality of children and young people that yield more conscious self-definitions, as the substance as well as the target of these changes is the personality itself. Participants in the

program develop an ability to reconcile with conflicting socialization systems, which is a highly positive mental hygienic asset.

By anticipating profession-specific situations in role-oriented activities in group work designed to enhance students' perception of role repertoires, it is ensured that students are given ample opportunity for practice and development in professional areas for which they are being prepared. Thus, they may evaluate their abilities against the challenges and expectations of the chosen profession. Therefore, it is more likely that the participants' reactions in pedagogically challenging situations will be fundamentally determined in quality by what they have learned during group sessions rather than by the activation of old school memories and experiences.

The program is recommended to anyone seriously interested in enhancing their repertoire of procedures and techniques in preparing students for the teaching profession. Although we claim no exclusiveness for our approach in teacher education, it is not difficult to see the results that the program has achieved. The program makes no specific professional demands on people who wish to employ it. Anyone working in teacher education may successfully apply it, without very specific professional prerequisites or particular competences, provided they are ready to adopt its basic principles and have acquired the program's methodology.

The training of trainers offers good opportunity not only to study and master the methodology of the program but also for the trainers to clarify their ideal concept of an educator, the objectives of the program, as well as the organizational principles of the system in which it may be tried out. Some knowledge of group dynamics is essential, but this is believed to be less of an issue than in conventional personality development groups.

Our work offers no evidence on the issue of whether or not a conscious development of specific knowledge domains is more successful in sensitive states or at a particular age. Constructivist considerations suggest that the answer to the latter of these issues is likely to be negative. It also remains to be shown what particular sorts of input trigger conceptual change in a person's understanding of their own personality, which was only indirectly shown to have occurred. Resistance to conceptual change is also a matter for future research to explore. Statistical evidence is likewise not available concerning the manner the program affects career fulfillment.

It is hoped that academic professionals who are currently working in teacher education institutions and are involved in preparing students for the teaching profession may make good use of the program.

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