Life Coaching as a Means to Build the Identity of Young People

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Abstract: There are many approaches and methods to that facilitate the achievement of intended goals for their users. The question of selected method is always crucial, because the kind of method you select largely influences the form of the result achieved. In this paper, I consider and argue the use of life coaching when working with young people as a method of facilitating the management of risks that arise from countless offers and options, to which the young are exposed (Giddens, 1994). Despite the great possibilities open to young people, we encounter significant failures, and often the criminal activity of young people, whose brutality is sometimes startling. It turns out that adolescence has never been as difficult as it is today (Giant, 2015). This work builds on the assumption that if young people are to be able to face social risks and challenges, they need to cultivate such skills and abilities in themselves that will allow them to not only survive, but primarily organize a life in which they benefit not only themselves, but also contribute to the proper functioning of society. I followed from authors who emphasize the need to develop and cultivate the identity and potential of individuals, which are the source of improved well-being, despite difficult situations (Masten, 1990; Ferguson, 2001; Seligman, 2004; Anderson, 2004; Saleebey, 2006; Lopez and Louis, 2009; Giant; 2015). The aim is to discuss whether life coaching can be regarded as a method for supporting young people in discovering their identity and carrying out safe life projects.

Key words: identity · life coaching · young people · postmodernity · potentiality · reflexive project

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1 Introduction

Almost limitless possibilities and opportunities are nowadays open to young people, from which they can choose and shape their own lives. But being able to choose correctly may not be easy, and for many, it is the requirement of a choice so difficult that they eventually avoid it altogether (Ludwig, 2013). For young people, the situation may be even more difficult, as they cannot rely on their experience when deciding, for they do not have any yet; and on top of that, they can be far more influenced by fashionable trends, which may overwhelm them more easily. This may lead to the fact that young people take on identities and create life biographies that bring them no benefits. It is alarming that the number of young people who commit crimes is increasing, their brutality increasing, more and more of those suffering from depression; and those who are flirting with the idea of death or voluntarily choosing to end their lives growing in numbers. These are very serious matters that lead to the need for a greater understanding of the fact that young people find themselves face to face with great opportunities offered by the postmodern era, what it means for them, and how to support them in order for them to seek life projects that are not dangerous for them, nor for their surroundings. I consider the extent to which the life coaching method can help young people uncover the meaning of their lives and identity, through which they can realize their full potential.

2 Research material and methodology

The main purpose of this paper is to reflect on the ways, in which we can help and encourage young people in their effort to find their way in life and to succeed, despite the uncertainty of today's postmodern era.

Firmly embedded identity versus identity as a reflexive project

The issues of searching for identity have a specific form in the context of the postmodern era. One of the most striking characteristics that characterizes the postmodern era is the process of individualization, which changes the firmly embedded identity of traditional societies into identity shaped as a reflexive project. As long as identity had been handed down from generation to generation as an unquestionable fate, the issues related to personal identity were essentially impossible (comp. Navrátil, Navrátilová, 2008). According to Bauman (1995), questions about identity rises from existential insecurity, uncertainty and non-definiteness of all its forms. Personal identity becomes problematic when gossiping social bonds provide freedom, and at that very moment, the need to model one's own identity. In this context, Giddens (1991) speaks about the project of the reflexive self, which he understood as an emerging identity that...
is socially constructed. Our self, human identity, is shaped and molded by life experience, which we gain during the course of our lives. Identity is not a fixed entity, but it has a fluid character. Man continuously integrates the events of the outside world and thus creates his own life biography, his own story about himself. In essence, the existence of reflexive self means that each individual creates their own identity, a biographical project as an individual project, where they themselves are principally responsible for the result of the self-creative process. As Zygmunt Bauman (1995: 125) metaphorically expresses “… and we now know or feel that there are no other ways than those characterized by our own steps in the soil at the moment we go over it…” According to Bauman (1995), the fact that nowadays we no longer live and breathe a project, but projects, is characteristic in the process of creating our own biography. The design of our own identity is a reflexive project to the effect that individual people constitute and negotiate their identities through critical reflection and under the influence of a constant flow of new information. This reflection is continuous in nature and may at any time change the trajectory of our life.

According to Giddens (1992), the realization of identity as a reflexive project primarily means that questions arise in an entirely new form: “Who am I?” “What is the purpose of my life?” “What goals are worthy?” “Who should I be?” “What work should I choose?” “How should I live?” “What values should I profess?” “What kind of life should I choose?” Existential psychologist Viktor Emanuel Frankl (1996) points out that these questions in principle cannot be circumvented or permanently suppressed. Every adult must answer them in some form, and they also inevitably assume final responsibility for the answers (comp. Frankl, 1996). As postmodern individuals, we take responsibility for the answers to these questions.

The increasing quantity and variability of information places the postmodern person before the constant requirement to make decisions and choose. This requirement places demands on individuals to acquire new skills, which will help them make decisions and plan their own lives. Ferguson (2001, 2003b, 2004) understands this need for the active shaping of personal life projects as a key parameter in defining postmodern society. It is therefore not at all surprising that popular topics related to issues of lifestyle, nutrition, personal development, etc., which characterize the effort to personally seek acceptable and valued ways of life, are massively popular. As noted by Navrátil and Navrátilová (2008), these actions can be interpreted as a search for an alternative of a lost life meta-goal, social norms providing instructions for life. The importance of these topics is also emphasized by the fact that the most important research topics that occur in sociology include those related to the quality of the life being lived (Hampllová, 2006). The effort to ensure that clients choose their own solutions and use their own resources to solve their problems is behind discussions on the use of strength-based perspectives in the helping professions, such as social work, social pedagogy, special pedagogy, adult education, and so on. (Salebeey, 2006). The issues of finding personal development and success are, in disciplines such as management, human resource management, human resources and so on, presented with a great interest in leadership, coaching and other development methods.

3 Results

Young people and the creation of life projects

The need to actively build our life biography is not only the privilege of adults. Although Frankl (1996) talks about the fact that every adult individual bears the responsibility for how they will respond to the questions related to their existence, the primordial questions about our identity arise before us much earlier than in adulthood. A number of opportunities and challenges, which are a feature of the postmodern era, is one of the reasons for the early confrontation of young people with issues related to finding their life projects and the need to choose among a number of potential life biographies.

Many authors point out that the combination of the amount of options, which a postmodern man is exposed to, and the lack of a socially structured social life and individual identity, create the pressure of uncertainty on an individual, resulting in the increased occurrence of new hazards (e.g. Bauman, 1995; Ferguson 2001, 2003b, 2004, 2003c; Frankl, 1997). The amount of young people who fail in their life journeys reveals the vulnerability of youth to this pressure of opportunities. The endless ocean of possibilities that opens up before our young can become dangerous waters, waves that can easily drown the young. Long-time youth counsellor Nick Giant points out, in this context, that: “…Many children growing up in today's world are richer than any previous generation. Millions of children have mobile phones, brand clothes, video game consoles and many other 21st century achievements. They have access to more information. The world is the largest library for them, which they have it at their fingertips. They are generally more educated than their parents and grandparents. According to this, children should be the happiest, healthiest and most successful people on Earth. And yet, there are incomprehensible stories of youth bullying, depression, suicide, theft and many other problems that plague our children. It seems that adolescence has never been harder than today!” (2014, p. 19).
Possibilities and the associated uncertainties among youth have accelerated in connection with the expansion of social networks, which are currently the most visible place for creating identities, the confrontation with them, and a place creating false identities that can have very negative consequences if accepted by young people. The postmodern era creates many opportunities for the creation of false identities becoming the image of a social atmosphere, which creates pressure to a conformist acceptance of a certain identity - the life project. For example, Ivo Možný21 points out that the social atmosphere of consumerism, in which young people live, leads to the fact that they do not start families. A social climate that creates a feeling of lacking money forces them to earn more and more money, although the money they already have is enough to start their own family. The life project associated with parenthood is very easily replaced by the project aiming to earn as much money as possible. Frankl (1997) sees the escape towards the conformism of consumerism as the consequence of the fact that man no longer has instincts that previously told him what he must do and what he should do. Their absence leads to the fact that many people do not know what they want and even what they should want.

Conformism has many forms among the young. The typical display of youth, for example, means that young people listen to the same music, go to the same movies, admire the same heroes and wear the same clothes. Punová (2015:74), referring to Klainová (2005, p. 68), states: “Clothing businesswoman Elise Decoteau said about her teenage customers: ‘They live in packs. When you sell something to one, you sell it to the rest of their class, and then the whole school’.” We would certainly find many similar examples. The uniformity of thought also contains the danger that this could, in an avalanche-like manner, become fashionable behaviour that may lead to catastrophic consequences, and in extreme cases death, for a young person. Creating a cult of super slim models may leave behind legions of young people suffering from anorexia, or those who do not have a good relationship with their body. The acceptance of violence as a way of solving problems may, with young people, give a false impression that shooting a gun solves, for instance, their problems at school. An example might be a 15 year old boy from Estonia, who shot his German teacher, or a student two years older, also from Estonia, confiding the planned shooting to one of his classmates the day before, that he would solve all his problems at school with a gun the next day. The problematic and criminal behaviour of young people is gaining new connotations in the context of virtual reality, which has become a natural environment for young people. If Matoušek with Kroftová (1998), at the end of the second millennium, pointed out the research surveys of Centerwaala (1992), that watching violence in movies increased violent crime within an interval of ten to fifteen years, then the Internet accelerates this process significantly. The 17 year old boy from Estonia who wanted to solve his school problems with a gun had posted pictures of wars and weapons on his FB profile a few days before the planned event, and wrote: “You have inspired the serial killer in me”22. This is one of the sad cases where a young person, who was considered a good student by his teachers and classmates, developed a problematic identity - he identified with the life project that has dangerous consequences both for himself and his surroundings. These and many other cases filling the pages of newspapers and other media point out, over the mantle of tragic stories, the difficulty of discovering one's own sense of life and identity.

I believe that young people more than ever need to have a helping hand in “the uncertain waters” of today, which will assist them in discovering their own identity and the creation of life projects that would contribute to their well-being. Although this aid can be seen at multiple levels, I see it in this work as an accompaniment in the development and cultivation of skills of young people, which can help them safely choose from the number of options and opportunities they are daily exposed to, in order to create their safe identities.

The development of young people's potential as an approach to shaping their identity

As previously mentioned, a large number of opportunities can pose a risk for young people, which can negatively affect their life trajectory. In the postmodern context, however, the risk is perceived positively as well. For example, Giddens (1994) sees risk as a challenge that can inspire our life vision and plans. Although young people need support so that they do not lose themselves among various opportunities, it is not desirable to focus purely on the elimination of such risks. Many authors (Giants, 2015; Munford and Sanders, 2015) suggest a helping hand in the form of cooperation, which would provide an opportunity for young people to realize what they want to achieve in life, to discover the meaning of their lives, to discover their own identity and to learn how to make decisions and how to choose. This cooperation is based on the premise that young people have sufficient potential and ability to handle all of this. Working with young people’s potential has become the core direction and the lens, through which we can assess the way they handle the risks that surround them. The cooperation between young people and those who assist them in achieving their plans, therefore, involves the discovery, cultivation and development of this potential. Focusing on the potential instead of the deficiencies brought a new view of individuals, who face their own problems, as well as a new view

22 http://zpravy.aktualne.cz/zahranici/strelba-v-esotnske-skole-zak-zastrelil-ucitelku-nemciny/r~940d431c5ded11e4b6d20025900fca64/
of professional work methods. According to Weick et al. (1989) the consequence of the deficiency approach is a belief that individuals alone are not able to cope with their situation. By contrast, focusing on the potential is based on the idea that every individual has the capacity and resources to manage their situation (Saleebeey, 2006). Concentrating on the potential opens a door to the discovery of one's own unsuspected possibilities and to the creative use of these possibilities in forming one's own life projects.

Youth is one of the most important periods in person’s life. During this period, young people are intensively preparing for their future in terms of both work and private lives. Professionals working with young people therefore face a crucial question: how should we cultivate and develop the potential of young people so that they are able to build safe life projects and identities for themselves? There are different approaches to shaping young people's identities. In this work I have drawn on Giddens' (1992) concept based on the social construction of identity, which is sensitive to different social and physical environments, in which young people live (Thomas and Holland, 2010). Within this concept the identity is then understood as a dynamic search for the person's own meaning and social status in different contexts, e.g. a family, school, peers, etc. (Munford and Sanders, 2015). Young people then, based on the values encountered in these contexts, create their own reflexive self, which has a major impact on shaping and designing their personal identity. Punová (2015) in agreement with Sharland (2006) points out that: "... although there are a number of risks, which may threaten the teenagers, we should not forget the fact that young people themselves are shaping their lives and that their life trajectory depends on the context of their social, material, cultural and relational world." (2015, p. 76). Munford and Sanders (2015) point out that, given this approach to identity formation, young people need help with discovering and exploiting new opportunities through which they could actively build and promote their own identity. According to Punová, (2014) one of the prerequisites for strengthening a person's identity is the development of resilience skills that enable young people to cope with "adversity.

Schools represent one of the most distinctive contexts, within which we can work with the potential of young people and in doing so shape their identity. Chip Anderson (2004: 1) argues in relation to the development of young people’s potential within the educational process that "... this concept of education involves teachers who deliberately and systemically seek discovery, development and application of their own abilities and potential in order to improve their teaching methods, which would enable them as part of the educational process to help students to discover their talents and potential, to develop their thinking and ability to solve problems and achieve an optimal level of personal excellence." The basic fact that we work with, when considering young people in the education process, is the acknowledgment that each of them has potential. The duty of the educators is then to help students to become aware of it and to actively assist in its cultivation and development (Lopez and Louis, 2009).

The work on the development of young people’s potential, as seen by many authors, lies in supporting their creativity, in developing their personal talents and cultivating their minds. Focusing on these characteristics seems essential in terms of achieving their personal excellence and in helping to build their future success (Peterson and Seligman, 2004; Seligman, 2003; Saleebeey, 2006; Lopez and Louis, 2009; Giant, 2015). A search for personal excellence becomes a search for one’s own meaningful life projects that form the identity of the young.

**Life coaching as a tool for discovering the identity of the young**

There are a number of development methods that help to cultivate the potential of individuals. I focus my attention on life coaching, which I see as an appropriate method that enables young people to consider their life biography and to reveal their identity in order to achieve success and happiness in life. Timothy Gallwey (1974) and John Whitmore (1992), who formulated and developed the method of coaching, considered the cultivation of thinking to be an essential prerequisite for success in life and for the development of one’s potential. In the early 70s Gallwey began to publish texts (1974) that formulated coaching as a new method suitable for the development of personal and professional excellence achievable by everyone. His professional work and experience led him to the realization that the our state of mind has the most fundamental impact on our performance. Therefore, it is necessary to pay attention to our minds and to reveal our inner game. His "Inner Game" not only brought knowledge about the importance of working with our mind, but it also showed the direction in which to focus our attention in order to win (Gallwey, 1974, 2004). Becoming aware of the sort of inner game each of us plays helps to reveal our inner fears and insecurities that are common obstacles to the achievement of our goals. According to Gallwey (2004), reflecting on our own "Inner Game" helps us not only to improve our own performance, but also to realize that we do not play in order to win, but to learn something, to use our own potential.

Coaching is based on fundamental principles that include the following: trust, awareness and responsibility. A good coach always encourages the coachee to believe in themselves, to believe they can achieve their goals, to become aware of and to understand the situation, in which they find themselves, and finally, to take responsibility for their lives.
The basic premise is that we alone are responsible for the kind of lives we live, and also, for the choices we make in life (cf. Gallwey, 2004; Haberleitner et al., 2009; Whitmore, 2013). In this respect, coaching is fully compatible with the Giddens reflexive self concept that assumes personal responsibility for the continuous reflection on living circumstances and for the creation of one’s own life projects. Coaching allows the coachee to explore their own reality and, in doing so, to find new ways of thinking and interpreting and to discover their own world of possibilities and challenges that they would like to actualize. The whole method is based on the premise that the coach approaches the coachee in terms of their potential. Having an optimistic view on the hidden and untapped potential of all people, he or she considers different ways of harnessing that potential in the client’s favour (Whitmore, 2013).

Life coaching is one of the various types of coaching. It has common roots with the business and leadership coaching model. What contributed to its development was the new knowledge about the interconnectedness between work and private life, which had a major impact on the performance of employees. The tools and strategies applied by business coaches started to be used outside of work and enabled the creation of life coaching (Giant, 2015). Life coaching is a tool that develops the potential of a coachee and helps them to achieve their own goals and visions. These are achieved by the cultivation of the thought process, through which we discover ourselves; we realize which paths we would like to follow in life and what results we would like to achieve. All this leads to the recognition of one’s own identity and to the choice of one’s own life trajectory.

With regard to the specifics of youth and the basic assumptions that underpin coaching, Giant (2015) pointed out that life coaching helps young people to:

- Better understand themselves including the mechanism that triggers their negative emotions;
- Identify positive and negative effects;
- Build relationships with others;
- Develop a positive and healthy self-image;
- Discover and build their own identity;
- Identify and achieve their goals;
- Improve self-confidence and self-esteem;
- Build resilience skills and coping mechanisms.

It is evident that thanks to life coaching young people can seriously focus on themselves and on their development; they can also find answers to the existential questions regarding the meaning of their lives and finding their own identity. The coachee learns to believe in themselves thanks to the emphasis that the coach places on believing in them and their abilities. This is essential throughout the whole coaching process. Many people do not achieve success in life not because they do not know what they want to achieve, but because they do not believe that they are able to achieve it. With regard to their young age and the frequently present insecurity that young people experience, it is important to work with them in a way that enhances their self-esteem and confidence. This will help them when considering and determining their personal goals regardless of any fashion trends. Life coaching inherently holds a great potential for the support of the young. Through this, the young can find themselves and discover the meaning of their own lives.

4 Conclusion

The main purpose of this paper is to reflect on the ways, in which we can help and encourage young people in their effort to find their way in life and to succeed, despite the uncertainty of today’s postmodern era. In this paper, I have explored the idea of using life coaching as an instrument to help young people to find their life projects and to discover their own identity. On the bases of Giddens' reflexive self concept I have shown how the risks that young people are exposed to, thanks to the countless opportunities, can be utilized in their favour. I base my work on the fact that, if young people are to cope with the difficulties associated with finding their place in life, they need some support from adults. I believe that this help should not be viewed primarily as a solution to a problem, but it should be focused on the development and the potential of young people. Above all, it should be focused on the development of such qualities and skills that would enable them to actively shape their lives despite circumstances. I considered the development of these skills via life coaching. I thought about the main possibilities of this method and considered how they can affect the ability of young people to create their own life projects. Based on theoretical evidence I found that life coaching, which was originally intended for workers, can be very useful for young people too. One of the reasons is that young people today, more than ever, like to choose their own way of life. I then see life coaching as a method that helps young people to make such a choice that would help them to succeed in life and to live their lives based on their own choices. Figuratively speaking, it is about them meeting with their "destinies", which reflect their identities. It turns out that life coaching has a great potential in this respect.
References


