FLEXIBILITY OF DEVELOPMENTAL GOALS AS AN ADAPTIVE MECHANISM IN YOUTH LEAVING THE PROTECTION SYSTEM

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Abstract

The research started from the observation that only the simple allocation of resources - material and financial - does not explain the development of adolescents and young people, as is the case with placement centers where, in apparently equal conditions, there are highly different results. The study aims to contribute to the understanding of the perception of this category of beneficiaries of the child protection system regarding the situation in which they are, the plans and directions of future development concerning the resources held, and the identification of some resilient mechanisms of interaction between the individual and the social context. The data were collected through three focus groups held in residential care in Iași county (Romania) and three semi-structured interviews that included adolescents and young people who were in residential care ($N_1 = 20$) and who left the system of child protection ($N_2 = 13$). The results revealed that the purposes of these young people do not differ from those of their colleagues who are not in residential care (school, career, family). However, their translation into practice is problematic and, as a result, with increasing age and leaving the protection system, there is an adaptation of the concrete objectives to the available resources (employment, work abroad). Goals alone are insufficient to support development, but resources (social, material, individual qualities) and social opportunities are needed.

Keywords: *residential care, child protection, development, purpose, goals, resilience*

1. INTRODUCTION

A specific connection between the purpose in life and the development objectives of each one on the one hand and the results obtained is evident if only from the fact that the latter can only appear following the establishment of the former. Development and success do not occur by chance but following planning, conscious or not, voluntary or involuntary, which makes it possible, in addition to identifying an endpoint outside the individual, to reach intermediate points and allocate resources efficiently to get them. Success is often associated only with the existence of individual and or social resources. However, their existence alone is not enough to guarantee it: resources, if they are not identified and valued, including by establishing objectives and a goal, risk being, and this is how it happens most often, ignored or wasted. The current material aims to analyze the connection between development on the one hand and objectives and purpose on the other, in the case of young people raised in the child protection system, starting from the finding that in relatively similar conditions, the results obtained are highly different, from total failure in academic achievement and social integration to outstanding success in those areas. The variety of effects can also be explained by a particular way of managing the respective resources, by a planning capacity that invariably involves the presence of a goal and objectives that allow the individual to be effectively oriented in social reality.

1.1. Theoretical concepts. Definitions

From a theoretical point of view, purpose is often linked to meaning in life, and the relationship between the two constructs varies according to the authors. For Viktor Frankl (2011), meaning and purpose are interchangeable. When he speaks of the individual's fundamental need for meaning or states that "who has a why, can do anything", he refers to the presence of a purpose. In other models, purpose is a component of meaning. In the tripartite model (George & Park 2016), meaning is achieved through purpose, understanding, and mattering. Purpose represents the motivational component of meaning and is defined as the extent to which the individual experiences life as directed and motivated by highly

valued life goals (p. 210). Meaning is also defined as the person's stable and generalized intention to achieve something meaningful for the self, which leads to a productive engagement with some aspects of the external world outside the self (Bronk 2011).

In Baumeister's (2011) model of meaning, individuals have four fundamental needs for meaning: purpose ("intentionality"), which denotes the human need to see one's activities as directed toward a specific goal. For Reker and Wong (1988), personal meaning has three components, one affective (satisfaction, fulfillment, happiness), one cognitive (beliefs, interpretations, understandings), and one motivational (values, needs, and objectives), personal meaning being the result of understanding one's purpose.

The relationship between purpose and meaning can be highly complex. However, here we limit ourselves to stating that it is generally accepted that the purpose refers to the motivational component of meaning, the one that supposedly causes the individual to act (not just to understand, to evaluate, feel, etc.), a component strictly separated from comprehension and the perception of one's value. "Purpose involves a prospective, directive, and potentially prosocial intentionality, whereas meaning may be more closely associated with perceived coherence and comprehension, religiousness or spirituality, and feelings of significance." (Ratner et al. 2021, p. 3)

Like motivation, purpose can have an internal, intrinsic source and another external, extrinsic source (Deci & Ryan 2015). Although the goal usually refers to something external (Damon, Menon & Cotton Bronk 2003) located in the individual's future, it cannot be achieved without internal (re)structuring, orientation, change, or mobilization. On the other hand, the goal implies the desire for accomplishment, but its value does not consist of the final objective nor its achievement; for example, the intention to attain it may be set somewhere after death (salvation, etc.). The importance of meaning lies in generating a sense of direction in this process; thus, the person's present actions derive their meaning from representations of future states of affairs (Baumeister 2011). McKnight and Kashdan (2009) use in this context the comparison of the goal with a compass that shows the direction and helps to orient the individual. Thus we have a balance between internal and external, psychological and social, and present and future components and processes that influence each other with effects on the development of the individual.

1.2. Hierarchy of goals and objectives

When one speaks of purpose in life, it is supposed to be highly general, but to achieve it, many other actions must be carried out, and intermediate goals must be achieved. For example, if a young person aims to become a good specialist in a specific field, he must at least follow certain studies and gain experience. Goals are more concrete and specific; they need to specify the expected results, while goals do not require this (McKnight & Kashdan 2009).

Some authors believe "the purpose can be considered a collection of objectives" (Ratner et al. 2021, p. 2). However, despite these positions, it is accepted (McKnight & Kashdan 2009) that the goals give meaning to the objectives and not vice versa. The objectives can be numerous and have positive effects on the development of young people, but these effects are limited in the absence of an all-encompassing goal (Baumeister 2011); the goals can exist without coalescing into a particular purpose. There are probably numerous situations in which individuals live without a purpose, which means that it is not essential to life but is a component that contributes to increasing its quality.

1.3. Effects of purpose presence

Given the characteristics of the purpose, numerous positive effects associated with its presence are mentioned in the specialized literature. Those who experience the existence of purpose, have a clear sense of the direction of their life and the goals they are aiming for, stimulate their emergence and organization of decisions and everyday resources (McKnight & Kashdan 2009), are encouraged to support prosocial behavior, moral commitment, personal achievement and self-esteem (Damon, Menon & Cotton Bronk 2003). In a review of research on the presence of a sense of purpose, Ratner et al. (2021) mention that it is positively correlated in adolescents with greater agency and positive emotions, that meaning can provide youth with a protective buffer by mitigating the negative effects associated with

poverty. In the case of young people, the purpose has been associated with greater social well-being, more grit, and a stronger sense of adult status, and is identified as a source of resilience in overcoming adversity.

For our research, the approach of (Bronk, 2011) is important, who analyzed the connection between the presence of a purpose in life and the construction of identity. According to it, the formulation and pursuit of goals in life by adolescents lead to the formation and encouragement of identity development. Through the commitments made, young people begin to see what their place is in the world, generating the process of building social identity, and the process, once triggered, strengthens the goals pursued. Through this process of mutual influence, the goal and the self become one: "I am the one who ...(acts in a certain way)".

Those who experience a low sense of purpose have the impression that things are pointless and the future appears to them without stakes (George & Park 2016); it is associated at a personal level with self-absorption, depression, addictions, psycho-somatic ailments and, socially, deviant and destructive behaviors, a lack of productivity, and the inability to sustain stable interpersonal relationships (Damon, Menon & Cotton Bronk 2003).

Given this importance given to the presence of purpose, understood instead as the result of a practical, concrete approach to planning the future than in its ultimate, philosophical version of "meaning of life", we propose to see what the perceived role of it in the lives of teenagers and young people from the protection system, mainly from placement centers. At the same time, we also follow how young people reorient themselves when their projects are recognized as unrealistic and which model of future planning seems to be the most successful for those who have left that system.

2. MATERIALS AND METHODS

2.1. Respondents

The data were collected through three focus groups in 2022 and three interviews in 2023. The focus groups were conducted in two placement centers in the city of Iași and in a Multifunctional Center in the same city that housed young people from the protection system who were in the process of socio-professional integration, respectively, looking for a job. The three individual interviews were conducted with young people who had left the residential care and who, at that time, were students at higher education institutions in Iași and Bucharest. The number of participants in the focus groups in the residential care was 20; 10 participated in the focus group in the multifunctional center. The sample structure appears in the table below.

Technique and place of data collection	Gender		Age	Average period of presence in the placement center (average)
	M	F	(average)	
Placement center focus groups (FG1, FG2)	5	15	15,75	7,5
Focus group multifunctional center (FG3)	5	5	18,8	13.2
Interviews with students from placement centers (I)	3	0	20,25	18

Table 1. Sample structure

Table 1 shows the structure of respondents by age and years spent in residential care. In the first category, of teenagers and young people in residential care at the time of the research, there are the people with the lowest ages and periods of participation in the system, followed by young people in the

process of socio-professional integration; with the highest average age and the most prolonged period spent in the residential care are the students who were interviewed individually.

The selection was made through convenient sampling in the case of focus groups, namely teenagers and young people who wanted to participate in the research among those who were in the respective centers at the time of the research. The three meetings took place in rooms in each center, in an environment familiar to the respondents. The participants in the interview were selected purposefully, aiming to select some young people from the residential care who recorded particularly positive academic results. Two of the three interviews with students took place at the headquarters of the General Directorate of Assistance and Child Protection in Iași. This county authority deals with the problems of minors in difficulty, and one interview was conducted through the Google Meet application due to the appreciable distance between the researcher and the interlocutor.

2.2 Data collection and analysis

The discussions have developed based on an interview guide that followed the interlocutors' experience in the protection system, the resources, mainly social, accessed here, and the goals and objectives considered both in the previous period and the current moment aimed at future projects. Two people conducted the focus groups and the interview by one person. All interviews - individual and focus group - were recorded in audio format, transcribed using the VatisTech application, and data analysis (coding and categorization) was done using the QDA Miner Lite application.

3. RESULTS

The goals and objectives expressed by respondents vary according to their age. The younger the age, the more important school is in their plans, and as age increases, the desire or need to find a job becomes more important. More generally, as a goal in life, personal achievement through aspects related to the acquisition of much money and which can be observed by anyone from the outside: big houses (villas) and expensive cars, appears very often in the statements in the interviews.

> *() Oh, well, I want much money, a big villa, and a man. (FG1)*

> *I always dreamed of having much money, buying many clothes, and having pets. (FG1)*

Sometimes these signs of success are pursued to impress others, sometimes they are pursued to prove to oneself that one has succeeded in life:

> *() I want to work abroad to get a car and a house to show off! (FG2)*

> *() To work to buy a big car to brag to the nations, to stop making me "poor". (FG2)*

> *() I have to do certain things just for myself, to show myself that I succeeded, that I was able to do that thing. Not to prove to anyone that I did that thing or that I succeeded () To be successful, to be able to be myself! First of all to be healthy, after that the rest! I want to be fulfilled, to have my car, to have my house so I can afford the things I want, to travel! These things! I make them to be for me, not to prove... (FG2)*

Sometimes purpose in life exists, but it is completely unrealistic and thus motivationally dysfunctional, if not detrimental to one's chosen trajectories:

> *Two people told me that I would be good as a psychologist, but not so much, or as a policewoman, that they said I was tough. () I wouldn't have the patience to be a psychologist. At one point I would have wanted to go to Law.* But what would you like to be? Judge, lawyer? *() One of them.* But how did you come up with the idea? Have you seen movies? *() Yes, I had also seen some films, I had an acquaintance who was a lawyer. I was in a courtroom once and it caught my eye. (FG2)*

Family and personal fulfillment are much less frequently mentioned as life goals in focus groups.

> *A wife, children, and education. (FG3)*

And I see myself with a family and a motorcycle. I like them very much! (FG1)

Interestingly, the existence of such a project in life is seen as a difference in their favor compared to young people who come from the family, who have its support and would be, for this reason, at a disadvantage. The existence of goals and objectives is a sign of responsibility and autonomy, which they demonstrate to a greater extent.

() We are somehow on our own path, we don't depend on parents or anything. When someone asks us what we're going to do in the future, "Yes, I'm going to finish school and then I'm going to get a job and then I'm going to have a family" but those who have a family don't always think like that. "My mother takes care of me, (...)" And so on. (FG2)

These are the goals of the young people still in residential care; when it comes to achieving them, the answers are highly different but can be grouped into two categories: by developing a career and by finding a well-paid job, preferably abroad.

() I want to finish high school because after that I sit with eight classes and do nothing. (FG1)

To take the baccalaureate and after that the Faculty of Medicine. (FG1)

You go abroad, make some money, get a car... (FG2)

For me, they are not dreams, that is, they are real, realities. Going abroad in the first coming month. I'm going to Germany to my mother. I'm leaving with one of my sisters. I want to see what it's like to work and earn a penny. Because the salaries here are not what they should be, I want to see something more. I worked for two months and then at (...), at the big factory at the entrance to (...). It was a very (big) effort, that is... (FG3)

In one case, it is clearly described how the development trajectory is modified due to the lack of resources. The young person chooses a shorter path to become independent faster, college requiring a more prolonged investment (in time and money).

() I also want to take the exam with high grades because I want to enter a fairly good high school, I say, at "Cuza" for natural sciences, and I would like to do a post-secondary after finishing high school, not necessarily a faculty. As a medical assistant. I'm good at this. Except that I have to pay more attention in biology class. Why not college? *() Because post-secondary education takes much less time than college.* Do you want to be independent faster? *() Yes. (FG1)*

Pursuing a career or, for younger students, graduating from school and pursuing a higher level of education often proves difficult. Although there are, as we have seen, clear objectives, often the effort to achieve them turns out to be too great.

() Uhh, in college… just this thought…. () Too much to learn. (FG2)

There are too many (requirement) It makes you mentally tired. (FG2)

I want to be a police officer (...)! But I can't! Until then I have to learn a lot and I don't like to learn! I don't like to sit with the book in my hand. I study, just to pass the class and pass the baccalaureate! (FG2)

However, there are cases where the purpose in life, the concrete objectives, and the activities carried out are much more coherently linked. The respective cases are much more realistic young people who "know what they want" and what they need to do to achieve their goals.

In the future I would like to save the country and enter the Army Academy. (Do you see yourself as a future officer?) *() Yes. I have a supportive family and they work there in the military. They help me and are a role model* (for me). (Have you been to the camp organized by them?) *() Yes, and I still keep in touch with them and go on holiday with them. (FG1)*

In the case above, a girl attended a military camp, where she received the support of a military family who continued to support and guide her. At the time of the interview, she wanted to go to the Military Academy to become an officer, for this excellent reason and being well advised.

In another case, a young man benefited from the residential care opportunity to take a barbering course during the pandemic. When we spoke to him, he was on the way to developing a career out of this concern.

> *I want to become an excellent barber and end up with a huge salary, because at the salon I'm at... I'm new and I'm already getting a decent salary. If I'm going to have experience, not experience because I have experience, if I'm going to have seniority, if I'm going to stay longer, clients start to know me and the more clients, the more money. After I end up with a decent salary, as I want it, and I will have the experience to do something else, then I will focus on another field, so that it will bring me more money. (FG3)*

Another young woman had a passion for cooking, wanted to take cooking courses and also intended to develop this concern into a profession in the future.

> *I want to finish school, take a cooking course, I like cooking, (after that) have a good job, be able to buy a house. (FG3)*

As for the students I interviewed, their cases have similarities and differences with those of their younger colleagues. In one of the cases, a boy developed a particular interest in sports because in the residential care, there was an educator passionate about running who also trained the children in this activity. The young man I talked to went to the Faculty of Physical Education, failed, but reoriented himself towards Geography. A second young man was passionate about drawing from an early age, and the center supported him in this passion; he is currently a student at the most important Faculty of Architecture in Romania. The third did not specify a particular passion but rather some interest in school and learning. He was always a good student, and when he chose high school and college, he could have chosen anything, given his results. In the case of these last three boys, what mattered was a desire (which can also be called a purpose) to succeed and develop oneself, and in which concrete goals were the means of approaching that goal.

> *For me, yes, yes, for me, yes, I saw this* (the importance of school) *from an early age, I realized that I felt for school from an early age. I mean, I was always coming home, I was trying to write from books, to read, to improve and that and in high school, I mean, I was always «Let's be serious, let's learn! » For me it was, I was going to school and trying to learn new things. I was trying to get something, to light a spark, to interest me. And a lot of material and not all the information was important to me, but I could find something to keep me interested and I liked going to school. (I)*

The existence of a goal (here, one's development) also establishes the criteria for choice when the options are numerous, as well as the dangers, the wrong choices.

> *Yes,* (achieving) *through school or studying abroad. Yes, through this. That's how I'd like it to happen. To develop, I mean yes, I hope it will be good. It's a hard time and what are you doing? You go to college, you leave, you get a job, where do you get a job? What are you doing with your life? It's hard! (I)*

It follows from the above that there are numerous levels, importance, and forces of goals, objectives of actions, from the purely declarative ones, which, even if they are concrete *(I want to become a judge or live in a villa),* most likely remain without effects, to the abstract ones *(I want to develop myself)* that guide the individual in his development.

4. DISCUSSION

The purpose of this study was to investigate the relationship between the existence of a purpose in life and goals, on the one hand, and the development of adolescents and young people who grew up for several years in residential care in Iași County, Romania, on the other hand.

A first observation is that anyone asked can name specific goals they aim to achieve, but they have different levels of generality. With McKnight & Kashdan (2009), we can call the most concrete and relatively short-term objectives and the most general purpose. Secondly, some people do not have a purpose but only goals (*"to earn money"*, *"to have a villa and a car"*, *"to become a policeman"*). Although this type of goal is more realistic than an abstract one, its effectiveness would not lie in its concreteness: among those with whom we talked, some young people have a very abstract goal, and precisely in the fact that it is abstract lies its adaptive character. In the latter's case, failure is easier to overcome because it leaves room for alternative scenarios (*"I did not succeed at the Faculty of Sports, I reoriented myself to Geography"*). If only one concrete goal is not achieved, no "plan B" will have to be taxed at the time of failure. Instead, the effectiveness of a goal would not lie in the concreteness or degree of abstraction of the goals but in the adequacy of the means available to it. If you want to become a lawyer but are unwilling to learn, you are likelier to fail than if you want to become a barber and love what you do. This last example shows that development can succeed if you have a goal (relatively modest, concrete, tangible) without it being subordinated to a higher purpose.

Furthermore, in the case of those who adapt their means to their goals/objectives, two elements are present: the development opportunity (a camp with a particular specificity, a course) as well as a pre-existing interest awakened by the opportunity or pre-existing (a passion, a concern, a talent). The difference between children raised in this environment and those raised in the biological family seems to lie not so much in the wealth of resources but rather in the presence of developmental opportunities (in their number and variety), which differ significantly in the two environments.

Given the data above, we can conclude that the goal is necessary for development because it places the individual on a specific trajectory and helps him manage his resources effectively. The goal does not have to be of the utmost generality (purpose in life), but it is enough to be a concrete and achievable development objective *("to do a cooking course")*. On the other hand, he must be allocated adequate means (resources). Finally, opportunities (cooking courses) and a pre-existing interest, inclination, and passion are needed to reach the goal. The components required for the effective operation of the scope appear in the figure below:

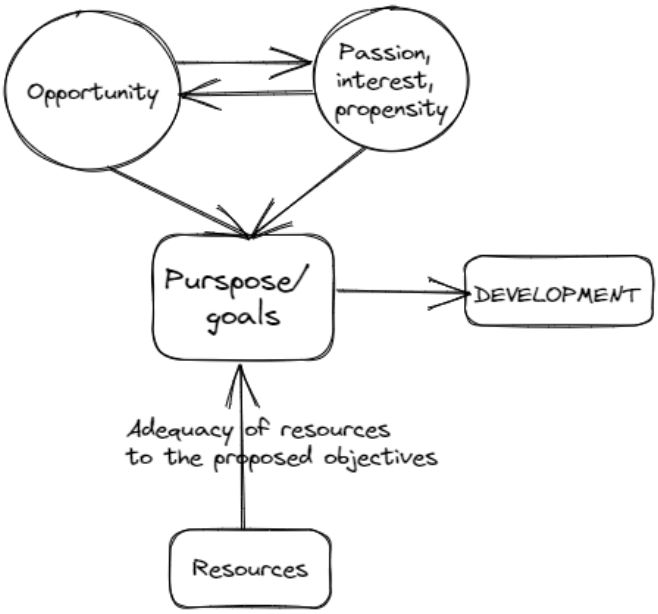


Fig. 1. Purpose/goals and related components in the development of young people

Figure 1 shows the importance of additional external elements of goal formulation: resources (including internal, personal) and development opportunities. In their absence, the goal and objectives remain only wishes, unrealized dreams.

The small number of participants limits the present study. However, we believe it can help understand the elements, including symbolic ones, that make development possible and explain different development under similar conditions of life. In this sense, we consider that he brings additional elements to the research that sees development only as a matter of resource assurance (external), of factors, and of the action of "variables" in which the individual has nothing to say. Positive results are not essentially a problem of allocation of resources (external) and the presence of individual factors (internal), but it is more than that, relating to the action of interaction mechanisms between the individual and the environment in which the existence of goals and objectives as well as the existence of opportunities and personal interests is necessary.

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