

Unfolding Principle of Individualization in Social Case Work



Ms. Shruti Chatterjee, a counsellor in Prerana provides psycho-social support to children with a history of trauma. She works in collaboration with Social Case Workers to understand and cater to the children's psychological needs. She has observed that Social Case Work and counselling are complex processes, where the professionals have to observe and uphold the basic principles such as adopting a non-judgemental attitude towards the client, confidentiality, individuality, empathy, regulated emotional involvement, amongst others. Translating these principles into practice is a challenge for each professional; if this is not followed, objectivity is often lost in the professional relationship, which makes it difficult for the Social Case Worker to maintain focus, hindering them from successfully facilitating transformation in clients' lives.

One such principle that needs internalization, practice, and in-depth understanding is the 'Principle of Individualization'.

In the article, Ms. Shruti pens down her thoughts and experiences of the significance of the principle of individualization while working with clients. It aims to help Social Case Workers to truly understand the principle of individualization while working with children within the juvenile justice system, from a counsellor's lens.

What is the Principle of Individualization?

Individuation: Fingerprints are unique to every person; iris is unique to every person and so is one's DNA. No two individuals are the same or exactly similar. Although all individuals as human beings have some commonalities such as their anatomy and life systems, every individual is unique and must be recognised to be so. Every individual likes to be recognised as a unique person and dislikes to be treated just as a number or one among the crowd. The search of self identity is a search of esteemed uniqueness. The very word case is historically inherently linked with its uniqueness and the need to treat individuals as unique beings.

Individualization stems from the fundamental realization of each person as a distinct entity. That each person is unique and possesses distinct capabilities. The principle of Individualization means each individual person, in this case the client is treated as a separate entity by the Social Case Worker and the counsellor. A complete information of the client is sought to establish an understanding of the client in order to work with the client towards addressing the identified area of concern. The Social Case Worker and the counsellor accept the client with all their strengths, weaknesses and experiences, and avoid labelling and stereotyping and recognise the potentiality of diversity and knowledge of human behaviour.

In other words, Individualization requires the counsellor and the Social Case Worker to be free from bias, preconceived notions and prejudices and be aware of their personal feelings, needs and countertransference tendencies.

While working for a particular client system (in this case children), Social Case Workers and counsellors categorise children according to their age groups, gender, intellectual abilities to conduct life skill sessions, educational or vocational sessions etc. However, it is imperative to consider that each child has their own individuality despite the commonalities.

In psychological perspective, individuation is a process where a person gains a sense of individuality and perceives himself/herself/themselves to be separate from others. Psychiatrist Carl Jung who worked extensively in theorising human personality and unconscious; in his writings suggested that the process of individuation being crucial for the development of self-identity, and therefore it starts from childhood. Individuals who do not develop a sense of individuation often feel 'lost', may have low self-esteem and would be likely to experience challenges while making decisions and perceive life to be stressful and challenging. For example, it is observed that a younger sister often imitates her elder sister or mother in terms of their behaviour, dressing and preferences. However, as the younger sibling grows older and explores her own individuality, she may discover a new and unique self which may not be like her mother or sister. If this identity remains unexplored, the younger sibling may report feeling 'dissatisfied' for reasons unknown to her. As Social Case Workers, we are to aid children develop their sense of unique identity.

Ordinarily, individuals experience individualization in primary relations like family, kinship, and neighbourhood. They are treated as one among the many/crowd in other collectivity which are essentially made of secondary relationships e.g. schools, railway station, public roads and other public places. Individuals have a higher sense of belongingness and self-worth where he/she/they experiences a treatment of individualization as against being treated as a student, traveler, customer, and patient.

Within the Juvenile Justice system, for instance a child who is admitted to a Child Care Institution with the name Farook* (as mentioned in the official document), however his family calls him by the name Imran*. In such a situation, the Social Case Workers needs to address the child with the name of his choice instead of insisting on addressing the official name. The child is likely to identify with his informal name, therefore it becomes important for the Social Case Worker or counsellor to ask the child which name he would like to be mentioned and addressed with.

Individuation refers to the process through which a person achieves a sense of individuality separate from the identities of others whereas Individualization is an act of acceptance or acknowledgement of individuation by a person.

What is the opposite of Individualization?

Generalization or Universalization?

Generalization or Universalisation are also the tools or techniques from the tool box of counselling or Social Case Work. Are they opposite to or conflicting with the technique of individualization? Are they mutually exclusive? Are they compartmentalised? The roughly correct answer could be, Yes, they are compartmentalised, and mutually exclusive. And No, they are not conflicting with each other. They both have their utility and niche in the tool box. While every individual has anxiety over the idea of one's death or getting hospitalised or bereavement over a near one's death, or failing in exam, or being treated unfairly or getting divorced that in itself doesn't keep oneself in a state of being dysfunctional forever.

Often using the technique of Universalisation helps the affected individual deal effectively with the crisis. We find no one cribbing over not having beautiful colourful feathers or wings unlike birds as one recognizes that it is a universal phenomenon that human beings don't have feathers, or no one is immortal and everyone dies sometime or the other, or that many students fail in exams and that is not the end of the world for them, or that many persons including the towering personalities have faced insulting or unfair treatment in life sometime or the other. The fact that it is not a unique problem of my own and many have gone through it and keep going through it everyday in itself provides great relief to the individual facing a similar problem. So, the principle or technique of Universalisation or Generalisation has its own niche in the tool box. A counsellor or Social Case Worker has to acquire the understanding about using them judiciously to help the client.

Each individual is a product of traits passed on biologically by parents and experiences from the environment (acquired and achieved). The individual develops a response pattern based on these imbibed traits and experiences. Social work professionals often overlook the individuality of children, perceiving them to be in the process of becoming an individual. This misconception often leads professionals to generalise their needs. While working with children, one must remember that each child has the agency to voice their particular needs, which may not be voiced by others in the same group. To elaborate this, a child in a Child Care Institution (CCI) may choose not to participate in an activity involving play, as opposed to his/her/their peers. When the child voices this choice, the case worker need not enforce it on the child as it being 'beneficial'. On the contrary, one needs to be able to explore the possible reasons for the child not wanting to participate in the activity and formulate other options for the child. It helps the Social Case Worker to understand the child and the child develops a sense of agency as they make decisions for themselves. For example, two 10 year olds when admitted in a Child Care Institution (CCI) following a traumatic event may react differently to the new environment; one child may take a year to adjust to his/her/their new shelter while the other child may get comfortable and develop a close and healthy relationship within a month.

Social Case Workers often come across children changing their preferences with time. For example, a child in a Child Care Institution may like to eat chapatis but eventually prefers not eating it; the same child may also stop eating non vegetarian food which she/he/they relished before . These changes and shifts of the child could become tiresome for the caregivers of the Child Care Institution, who look after providing each child equally nutritious meals. However, the child exploring different food options is a form of self exploration and preferences. Here the Social Case Worker may help the child in the process by discussing it instead of being critical towards it, adamant that such changes and preferences cannot be accommodated or comparing them with other children.

The Principle of Individualization requires the Social Case Worker to move at the client's pace . Correct pacing helps in developing trust and is to be ensured at every level of the casework process—study, diagnosis, and treatment. Showing haste may jeopardize/delay the development of trust between the Social Case Worker and the child. The Social Case Worker will also have difficulty in getting entry into the child's feelings which is important for the Social Case Worker to involve the child in problem solving.

When children are deprived of agency, they tend to develop self-doubt and feelings of inadequacy and confusion. Usually, adolescent girls show agility in their movements. Social Case Workers often appreciate this and encourage these girls to participate in extracurricular activities such as dance or sports. However, some of the girls, despite their agility and talent, do not wish to be a part of these activities. In such situations, Social Case Workers may pass subtle remarks on them, calling them 'lazy' or 'uninterested'. This often impacts the child's sense of agency and children start questioning themselves as those extracurricular activities as told to them are enjoyed by 'normal' girls. It is imperative for the Social Case Workers therefore to keep aside their biases, and see the child as an individual with their own likes and dislikes and treat them with dignity and worth.

Agency is defined as being able to make choices and decisions to influence events and to have an impact on one's world. Supporting children's agency is about recognising that children have a right to make choices and decisions, and are capable of initiating their own learning.

Can the Principle of Individualization be overlooked?

The principle of Individualization when practiced can have many positive impacts on the child's development like having clarity of their individual needs and thoughts, resulting in successful casework. However, the consequences of overlooking this principle have shown to cause many emotional and behavioural challenges for the child such as irritability, despondency and in extreme situations psychological disorders. For example, if the child does not use the pronouns in congruence to the determined sex at birth (Girl saying 'Main nahi jaunga', 'Main khaunga'), the counsellor or Social Case Worker can explore if the female child identifies as a male and not presume that it's a grammatical error. (Generalization may interpret it as mere grammatical error but individualization will explore if it indicates any more serious situation) This practice helps the child to feel the autonomy in the professional relationship, if done otherwise, the child may develop dysphoria, anxiety, guilt and shame about themselves.

In many instances, it is observed that some children are questioned and reprimanded for not being able to grasp academic information as well as their peers. Children with such negative experiences often shy away from education and also the Social Case Worker and may start to distance themselves from the case worker. This impacts the relationship between the child and Social Case Worker. For example, a child asked to learn tables and his/her/their inability to do so, often leads the child to avoid interaction with the caseworker as a result of anxiety. In some instances when the child is labelled a 'problem child' in the CCI because of his/her/their aggressive behaviour, everything that the child does is perceived as a problem behaviour.

Each child can feel differently despite being in the same situation. While one child might feel frustration due to the COVID imposed lockdown, another would feel glad about not stepping out and liking his/her/their space. As caregivers, Social case workers or counselors, we need to assess the state of emotions of every child and try to understand them without questioning it. When feelings are questioned, the individual experiencing the emotion feels at the spotlight and eventually embarrassed about it. It is important to understand that feelings are always valid for an individual and that there is no correct or incorrect feeling for a particular situation. For instance, if the child is questioned, mocked or teased for missing their friends back at home while the child continues to stay at the CCI, the child is likely never going to express their emotions to the Social Case Worker as they would not feel understood. Similarly, if the child is reprimanded for sharing that he/she/they feel anxious when asked to recite tables in front of the Social Case Worker, the child would feel embarrassed and may also apologise for feeling anxious; here the child does not need to feel apologetic about anxiety. Therefore it becomes crucial for Social Case Worker to be sensitive and accepting towards the child's emotions even though they may not be able to empathise with them. It is important to take time to observe and understand the child up close and from afar. Look for changes. Look for new skills. Experience the child by interacting with them, listening to what they are saying and ensure you make them feel understood. The Social Care Worker must refrain from comparing the child with other children when the child confides and shares such feelings with them.

Conclusion

Individualization as a principle when not practiced in working with a child, the child is likely to develop dependency on others to make decisions, lacks self confidence, and will have difficulties to solve problems. Children often ask for suggestions and seek validation that their decisions are correct as they fear they may make the wrong decision. In such instances, during the counselling session, the child is helped to use their own decision making and problem solving skills to come up with the right response. This dependency could develop into a dependent personality trait which is a harmful personality style.

Therefore, even if the child doesn't develop any mental health issues due to the lack of individualization, the child is more likely to be dependent on others. As mentioned previously, Social casework and counselling are complex processes and it takes conscious efforts to apply this principle in professional life. Practicing individualization can be seen as a road to successful casework and most importantly, creating a healthy environment for the child to develop.



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