

There is an inherent challenge in the profession of youth workers: to properly carry out their mission they need to establish a certain relationship with the youngsters, but this relationship can easily grow and overflow the professional boundaries. Cultural differences can bring further subtleties. Our incidents illustrate how youth workers occasionally go beyond their professional roles on their own initiative or through the actions of the young people. In other situations, the professional



identity of the youth worker is rejected, not recognised. All these incidents imply forms of “threats to the professional identity” that we are going to explore through the concepts proposed by “Identity process theory” – “IPT” (Breakwell 1986, Bardi et al 2014). If we look closer at the incidents that we collected from youth workers (as opposed to youngsters), we’ll notice that almost all of them include some form of threat to the professional identity. This is indeed a feature of “culture shocks” in professional fields: they tend to disrupt how narrators think of their professional roles or how they are able to perform them. Here below after giving a short introduction to Identity Process Theory (IPT) we’ll explore the different forms of identity threats observed in the incidents.

According to IPT, identity is not static and rigid, but rather under continuous dynamics of reconstruction that follow specific processes and motives. These latter orient the identity construction process: they imply needs that the identity has to fulfil. IPT predicts six such motives, that we collected in the box below.

- (1) continuity across time and situation (continuity);
 - (2) uniqueness or distinctiveness from others (distinctiveness);
 - (3) confidence and control of one’s life (self-efficacy) and
 - (4) a sense of personal worth or social value (self-esteem).
 - (5) belonging – maintaining feelings of closeness to and acceptance by other people (Vignoles et al., 2002 ; Vignoles et al., 2006)
 - (6) meaning – finding significance and purpose in one’s life . (Vignoles et al., 2002 ; Vignoles et al., 2006)
 - (7) a psychological coherence motive – establishing feelings of compatibility among one’s (interconnected) identities (Jaspal and Cinnirella 2010)
- Bardi et al 2014 :176)

IPT defines “identity threat” as situations whenever the usual processes¹ of identity construction cannot ensure the satisfaction of these motives. Identity threats are psychologically unpleasant events that are accompanied by negative emotions such as stress and anxiety, and if repeated, the professional can experience sensations of “burn-out”. Let’s explore the types of identity threats that appear in our incidents

¹ We refer here to processes through which new identities are created, negotiated in interaction with the environment. This is not a linear or automatic assimilation process, but rather is based on a series of interactions, selections, accommodations. For example: I don’t suddenly acquire one particular “psychologist” identity when I receive a diploma. Rather I keep integrating elements of my identity of “psychologist” through feedback I receive, books I read, models I admire etc.

Threats to continuity

Threats to continuity are probably the most recurrent ones: they imply a rupture in the professional's capacity to remain in her professional role, follow the values and practices connected to her professional official mission and goals. In the situation "*Between the lovers*" (HU) a youth worker is drawn into the life and then the disputes of two people who became a couple during her workshops. Officially she should not get involved in the private lives of her participants, but she does. She should not help their moving together, but she does. She should not be requested to take sides in their disputes, but they expect her to do so.



In another incident, after a workshop about prejudice and discrimination a facilitator is approached by a participant with an unusual request: "Can you please find me a wife? (FR)". This task falls clearly outside of her official missions, implying an abrupt change from facilitator expert of prejudice to matchmaker and relationship-coach, involved in the private life of a participant.

Threats to meaning

Most threats to continuity also imply a certain threat to meaning. For instance, for the facilitator in the "Madame Find me a wife" situation her role of trainer can be central to her sense of meaning. When the participant repositions her from this role to the role of a matchmaker, he involuntarily cuts her from her connection to meaning.



We can find another illustration in the "Don't follow the Ramadan (FR)" incident. The narrator observes a scene where (from her point of view) a youth worker transgresses his role by suggesting to a young Muslim to stop following the Ramadan. This puts in jeopardy some of the key elements that for her give meaning to their work with youngsters: non-interference, respect of autonomy. Without the respect of these values, the professional identity as a youth worker becomes meaningless for her. This also affects

self-esteem, the sense of worth very close to professional identity.

Threats to value

Threats to value and recognition happen when the participants' reactions question the worthiness of the actions of the youth workers. Such is the case in "I'm over it a long ago" (HU), "These activities are shit" (HU) or "What a drag" (ES), where a participant rejects an approach, an attitude or a behaviour that the narrators are proposing. Such a rejection sends the message that what the youth worker is trying to bring, add, propose has no merit, no usefulness for the youngster. In some cases, the attitude / activity proposed can be very central to the youth worker, her conception of her profession or of human nature etc. In such cases the threat to value is a threat to meaning and to self-esteem at the same time.

Threats to self-efficacy

We have several examples of threats to self-efficacy, where the professional experiences a loss of control over the situation. The most telling example may be the incident entitled "Hungry (FR)" in which during a workshop a youth worker lets slip that she's hungry. One of the participants invites her to give her something to eat, and soon she finds herself waiting, in the participant's room, in the company of his roommate, a man

unknown to her, in a building where Muslim men just start their prayer. She loses her sense of control, which she can regain only by escaping the situation. Similarly, in the incident “Sound system” (FR) due to the insisting intervention of a volunteer, the narrator loses his control over the technical set-up of a public event.

Threats to distinctiveness



The incident “Sound system” can also be an illustration of threat to distinctiveness: the young man triggering the shock is from the same larger geographical – cultural area as the narrator. Based on this, he *perceives* a certain proximity that is stronger than the proximity felt by the narrator, who’s need for distinctiveness, separateness for the young man is diminished. The proximity in age can also blur separation and induce a sense of proximity for participants, such as in “Declaration of love” (FR) where a participant declared his romantic intentions

to the facilitator and did not accept her declining the offer.

Threats to coherence

Threats of coherence emerge when people cannot reconcile different identity positions, for instance between the personal and professional identities, both of which of course culturally determined. In “When will be the next training” (HU) the protagonists’ identity of friendly and considerate person clashes with her professional position requiring keeping of boundaries. In “Predator” (HU) it is the facilitator’s position concerning clashes with her professional rule of non-interference in the private lives of participants when she feels compelled to protect one of the participants from the seduction desires of another participant. In “Hot dress” (NL) the Dutch protagonist faces a conflict among her overlapping identity positions; according to her role as a teacher she should ensure order and protect the respect and safety of her students. But in her personal identity positions she also belongs to two different cultural communities which both are present in the class. She feels hypocritical saying: ‘I also cover my body and hair up when I visit my Islamic family in law’ This clash has an effect on her professional role as a teacher.



To conclude, we can see that exercising youth work in a context of cultural diversity can illustrate all the differences of identity threats predicted by theory. It is interesting to note that this specific sensitive zone (with rare exceptions) is not so much related to cultural distance per se, rather most of the time to the intents of the youth workers to adjust to their representation of differences and expectations towards diversity.

References

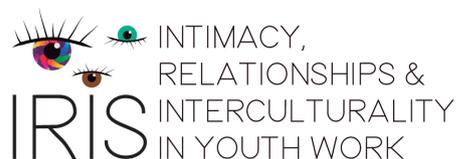
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Incidents

Title	Country
Between the lovers	HU
Predator in the training	HU
When will be the next training	HU
Sound system	FR
Hungry	FR
Don't do the Ramadan	FR
These activities are shit	HU
I got over this long ago	HU
Madam find me a woman	FR
Declaration of love	FR
What a drag	ES
Knocking on every door	NL

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PROFESSIONAL IDENTITY

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