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‘I got to know myself better, my failings and faults’: Young people’s understandings of being assessed in secure accommodation

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Abstract

This article explores young people’s understandings of assessments conducted in secure accommodation. The concepts of *institutional identity* and actions as *text-mediated* have been used in the analysis. The main empirical material is repeated interviews with assessed young people during a two-year period. In the findings the stories of three young people display understandings of appreciation, disappointment and self-development. The assessments seem to have made the youths aware of their ‘failings and faults’. An analysis of the written assessments found institutional identities of ‘inner problems and unstructured everyday lives’. In conclusion, the young people’s understandings of the meanings and implications of the assessments are suggested to be connected to the caseworkers’ text-mediated actions and their position in the assessment process. The young people’s stories indicate the need to consider the institutional context of the assessments and to acknowledge young people’s efforts in care.

Keywords

Assessment, Institutional identity, Secure accommodation, Text-mediated actions, Young people

Introduction

What to do about ‘problematic youths’ has been an issue discussed for a long time (Ohlsson and Swärd, 1994). For the most troubled youths, institutional care has often been seen as one solution. How young people in institutional care are found to be troubled has varied historically (Frost, Mills and Stein, 1999; Lundström, 1993). Since the early 1900s, terms have changed, from descriptions of ‘vagrancy’ and ‘immorality’ in young people’s poor families (ibid) to present-day concepts such as anti-social behaviour, conduct disorder and ADHD (Bryderup, 2004; Jakobsen, 2013). These diagnostic categories correspond to a discourse of individuality in today’s society, where troubles are seen as an attribute of the individual person, as something within people, and preferably used by professionals (Mik-Meyer, 2006). As discussed by Follesø (2015), however, terms can be perceived differently by those who are labelled. Previous research demonstrates how professionals’ interpretations of the troubles of children in care become objective considerations that guide, not only their thoughts and talk about young people, but also their actions (Espersen, 2010; Jakobsen, 2010; Schwartz, 2001). Thus, the way the troubles of young people in care are understood by professionals has real consequences for their lives, although the understandings are not necessarily shared by the young people.

Gubrium and Järvinen (2013b:3) claim that troubles: ‘must be constructed as problems for professionals to appropriately respond to them’(cf. Emerson and Messinger, 1977). For professionals, assessing people in formal procedures is a way to transform people’s ambiguous troubles into defined problems and determine how best to respond, i.e. to shape *institutional identities* (Gubrium and Holstein, 2001a). The assessment procedures often aim to create a written document where the troublesome situation is defined in order to guide further actions. The relationship between assessment and intervention might be seen as straightforward, following the logic of first identifying the problems and then providing appropriate measures based on that. However, it is the reader that activates the written assessment (Smith, 2005:108), and previous studies demonstrate that in a local context this process is multifaceted, complex and sometimes far from straightforward (Gubrium and Järvinen, 2013a; Hall, Juhila, Parton and Pösö, 2003). Having people’s troubles turned into problems is also a process of ‘clientisation’ (Gubrium and Järvinen, 2013a:5). When people’s troubles are categorised by human services, they are also turned into clients in processes that connote dependency. In asymmetrical relations young people’s encounter with professionals is directed by the care system’s bureaucratic routines.

The present study concerns assessments of young people in secure accommodation within Swedish child welfare. This assessment procedure could be seen as a process where young people’s troubles are transformed into problems, a transformation that may have consequences for their lives afterwards. Although institutional assessments have a historical heritage in Sweden (Sallnäs, 2000), research is limited about how troubles are transformed into problems in these assessments, how the assessments

guide subsequent events and how such comprehensive intervention as being assessed while placed in an institution is perceived by the young people. The aim of this article is to explore young people's understanding of being assessed in secure accommodation; how they perceive its meanings and implications for their lives.

After a description of the research setting, a theoretical framework is presented and the method and analytical approach are described. In the findings, three young people's stories are examined. The concluding discussion addresses young people's understandings and their position in the assessment process, how they relate to the institutional identities and caseworkers' actions. Implications for practice are suggested.

Research setting

Unlike countries where secure accommodation operates within a youth justice framework, in Sweden these facilities are the responsibility of child welfare (Hollander and Tärnfalk, 2007). With their possibility of incarceration and applying other powers, these institutions have ambiguity in their mission and constitute a last resort for young people in troublesome situations (Levin, 1998). All Swedish secure accommodation units are state-run by a national board (The Swedish National Board for Institutional Care) and about 1,000 youths aged 12–20, of a total of about 30,000 children in out-of-home care, enter secure accommodation each year, and of these 300 to 400 are assessed. There can be between 12 and 49 residents and between two and seven units at each accommodation facility, mainly locked units. Most of the young people are boys, 15–18 years old, in compulsory care, and the reasons for their placements are a mixture of criminal behaviour, use of alcohol and drugs, and poor mental health (Vogel, 2012).

Assessments in secure accommodation are requested by social service departments and handled by caseworkers. During eight weeks the assessments are performed with the main objectives of defining the features of the young people's troubles and proposing appropriate interventions (Enell, 2015). The assessments are performed by psychologists, educators, family and network investigators, medical doctors, as well as unit personnel. After completed assessments, the caseworkers are informed both verbally and in writing about the conclusions of the assessments and the recommended interventions. It is then the social services that decide further interventions.

As a phenomenon, institutional assessments are neither new nor limited to Sweden (Sallnäs, 2000). In research, concerns about the institution as an assessment environment have been raised due to its artificiality and turnover in peer groups (Andreassen, 2003; Goldson, 2002). Hennem (1997) also found complex conditions of paradoxes permeating staff's work; staff wanted to develop trusting relationships with the youths but when youths asked for confidentiality the trusting relationships conflicted with the staff's mission to collect information. Moreover, the challenges to comprehend

young people's contradictory selves conflicted with the bureaucratic decision making, where complexities were reduced and troubles emphasised.

Theoretical framework

This article takes an interactionist approach and a perspective of the self as socially and relationally constructed (c.f. Mead, 1992/1934). This means that young people's understandings of themselves will, in some way, be related to and influenced by professionals' transformation of their troubles into problems. Accordingly, when young people's troubles are transformed into problems, child welfare also becomes a self-constructing institution (Spencer, 2001). Taking this as a starting point, the processes of transforming young people's troubles into problems and the way in which written assessments are activated is analysed using the concept of *institutional identities* proposed by Gubrium and Holstein (2001a), together with Smith's (2005, 2007) understanding of text as coordinating people's actions, actions that become *text-mediated*.

Organisations and professionals, such as social services, institutions, social workers and pedagogues, are assigned to work with troubled identities of young people (Gubrium and Holstein, 2001a; Gubrium and Järvinen, 2013a). In the encounter between young people ascribed a troubled identity and professionals, a process takes place for the professionals, that of transforming youths' troubled identities into institutional identities. Institutional identities are the language of the organisation about problems and can be seen as necessarily simplified images or models in order to carry out the complex work in human services. While troubled identities are vague, institutional identities provide clarity (Gubrium and Järvinen, 2013a). Thus, an institutional identity is something for the professionals that makes people's troubles manageable. This transformation process was suggested by Emerson and Messinger (1977) as something circular rather than linear since institutional identities, diagnoses set by professionals, both shape and are shaped by responses. Hence, institutional identities could rather be seen as an emergent product for the professionals.

A known institutional identity of troubled youths, as termed by Donzelot (1979), is *the dangerous child*, an identity used to justify incarceration for minors. Another example is the moral characters that Emerson (1969) found connected to sanctions within the youth justice system. The three characters were *the normal youth* that was found to be harmless, *the criminal youth* that deliberately committed crimes and *the disturbed youth* that lacked rational explanations. The sanctions related to these characters were: probation supervision for the normal, correctional institution for the criminal and specialised treatment for the disturbed. In more recent research, Espersen (2010) discerned two institutional identities of children in institutional care: *the sick* and *the damaged child*. Through the mental illness the sick child was relieved of guilt and responsibility, in need of care and to be spared from strains in the environment. The damaged child, on the other hand, was regarded as lacking an inner structure, which made it difficult to interact with others and to understand others' feelings. The

parents and the child were seen as responsible for the lack of inner structure, and professional care was supposed to restore the child as much as possible by firm structure in everyday life. In all these different institutional identities, they are connected to courses of action.

In assessments at secure accommodation a text is produced, a text where the institutional identity of the youth is presented. In texts such as assessments, a specific understanding of terms is provided and subjects are located in procedures and tasks (Smith, 2005, 2007). Some of these subjects will have agency, authority to act, others will not. When texts are read and acted upon the text, with its terms and located subjects, is activated and the actions become text-mediated. This is what makes texts coordinate people's actions, to link people's doings into organisational acts (Smith, 2007:178).

Although readers of the text will, in different contexts, make different interpretations, the characteristic of a text–reader conversation is that one party is responsive and one party (the text) is fixed and constant. In this perspective, when written assessments from the secure accommodations are interpreted and acted upon by its prescribed subjects, assessments may affect the lives of the young people.

Thus, the youths' troubles are understood and transformed into institutional identities in the assessment process and activated by its readers through the written assessments. However, the meaning of these text-mediated identities is not something given; it is activated and affirmed as interaction develops (Smith, 2007).

Method and analytical approach

This article is part of the author's PhD study, a study based on a variety of methods allowing an exploration of a complex phenomenon: institutional assessments of young people (Enell, 2015). Sixteen young people were followed during a two-year period starting with the assessments at the secure accommodation. For the concerned youths, this two-year period was part of their trajectory through care that might have started some time, long or short, before they were placed to be assessed. With Strauss's (2011/1993: 53) definition, trajectory is the course of a phenomenon evolved over time and shaped by the actions and interactions of involved actors. The studied sequence of the young people's trajectories is subsequently part of an ongoing process in which their troubles have already been transformed into institutional identities.

All participating youths were placed to be assessed at three units in secure accommodation between September 2010 and February 2011. These units were selected due to their experience of providing assessments and admitting boys and girls of a variety of ages. Youths were first informed by staff and then informed and asked by me, the author, to be interviewed. If younger than 15 years, their parents' consent was obtained as well. In all, 16 youths gave their consent, 10 boys and 6 girls between the ages of 12 and 18. The young people also consented to interviews with their caseworker and 15 of the

16 youths consented to share their written assessments. The procedure was independently reviewed and approved by a regional ethical board.

The main empirical material consists of three interviews with each youth. The first interview took place at the unit when the assessment was completed; the second one year later where the youth lived at that time, and the third two years later by phone. The interviews were semi-structured and lasted between 10 and 90 minutes. Questions in the first interview concerned the young people's experiences of the assessment, what initiated the assessment, their participation in the assessment process, and their thoughts about the future. The next interview was guided by four questions – what their current lives were like, their thoughts about the assessment, the time after the assessment, and what they thought about their future. The young people also had the opportunity to read and reflect on the transcribed first interview, as a way to explore their present perspectives. During the third interview, the young people were asked to tell about their current situation and their thoughts about the assessment and what it had meant to them. The repeated interviews allowed for questions that addressed sensitive issues and uncovered variations related to time (cf. Holstein and Gubrium, 2003). The young people were in general outspoken and described their experiences carefully. The interviews can be regarded as collaboratively produced and contribute to a more complex picture difficult to access in other ways.

The empirical material also includes one semi-structured interview with the caseworkers, the young people's written assessments conducted at secure accommodation and observations of nine assessment meetings in secure accommodation. The interviews with the caseworkers were conducted one year after the assessment; 13 were interviewed by phone, three in person. Addressed themes were how the assessment at the secure accommodation was initiated and how the caseworkers had used the assessment to form further interventions. The collected written assessments were compiled by the assessment team at the secure accommodation; they consisted of between 18 and 50 pages and included separate reports regarding the youths' behaviour at the unit, school achievements, mental health, family relations and a report about the overall conclusions and recommendations. The participant observations of nine assessment meetings were conducted at all three units. Concerned meetings, where the young people, parents, caseworker and professionals at the secure accommodation attended, either initiated or ended the assessment. Field notes about who attended, what was said during the meeting and events during and related to the meeting were taken.

Through repeated readings of the transcripts, written assessments and field notes, comprehensive chronological stories were compiled for each young person. In compiling these stories, characteristics of the processes for the assessment and subsequent events and the young person's understandings of these processes were noted. Three cases were then chosen to more explicitly describe how the young people's troubles were defined and how they understood the process. The selected three cases were

rich in information and should be seen as illustrative examples of how institutional identities are constructed and understood by these youths in the local context of secure accommodation. Names and details in the stories have been changed to protect the young people's anonymity.

Findings

The reason for the 16 young persons' placements is diverse and often a combination of more than one: abusive behaviour, drug use, stealing, absconding and poor mental health. Some young people said they did not know why they were placed. While most of them (10) had experience of previous out-of-home care, for six this was their first encounter. Next I will introduce the stories of Alex, Billy and Cecilia. First I present what was stated in the written assessments about the youths. An analysis of how the young people's troubles are understood in the written assessments is then provided. The next section presents the youths' and the caseworkers' stories about what happened after the assessment with a focus on the youths' understandings of being assessed.

Alex: 'I wouldn't have been able to control myself as I do today'

Alex was accused of an abuse situation that Alex's caseworker found too complicated to assess at home. The day after Alex was notified about the assessment, his caseworker met Alex for the first time and drove him to A-wood.

In A-wood's written assessment Alex was described as happy, alert and helpful at first, later as threatening and angry. It was said that Alex frequently talked about death. In school Alex was perceived to lack self-confidence and to perform below average in theoretical subjects, better in practical ones. Alex's intelligence profile was reported to be significantly below average and the psychologist stated that Alex could be diagnosed with the label ADHD. Alex's learning difficulties were considered as a risk factor for re-abuse. Tests also displayed that Alex was unhappy and had low self-esteem. It was stated that Alex's parents had difficulties in their supervision and were inconsistent in their parenting. From this description of Alex, he was recommended to be placed in residential care that could offer schooling on site. Alex needed treatment for his abusive behaviour, individual support in school and in managing rage. Alex was also recommended support for daily living and a meaningful leisure time. In the written assessment it was stated:

Alex needs secure and consistent adults that provide a high level of structure and set suitable limits.

The parents were recommended parenting education and it was also recommended that they have their parenting complemented in everyday life. What the assessment team meant by this was not specified. Finally the assessment team suggested that the social services, before Alex was about to move home, should evaluate the situation and consider further interventions.

When analysing A-wood's written assessment of Alex, three elements in the institutional identity can be identified: Alex's abundance of anger, low self-esteem and self-confidence, and learning difficulties. The description of Alex that establishes an institutional understanding of him and provides a course of action is that Alex is malfunctioning and that his parents' dysfunctional parenting abilities have obstructed a successful handling of Alex difficulties. Alex's institutional identity warrants comprehensive and professional care at a place where all Alex's needs are met. In this treatment, the need for structure and limits is emphasised.

Alex's caseworker said she found the assessment trustworthy and acted in accordance with the recommendations. After a total of nine weeks at A-wood, Alex was placed at A-side residential home. At A-side, Alex was no longer found to have learning difficulties, which A-side's psychologist explained by Alex being in a crisis situation at A-wood and in a more secure situation at A-side.

In my first interview, Alex frequently responded to my questions with 'I don't know'. At the time of this interview, Alex did not know when he would leave A-wood or where he would go. Just a few days later Alex moved. In Alex's second interview with me, one year later, Alex had more to say. He did not speak of the assessment, nor of the procedures or the written text; instead he spoke about the organised everyday life at A-side. Besides school, leisure activities, housework and a daily silent hour Alex, together with peers and staff, had lessons in anger management and token economy, methods for behaviour modification every day of the week. When asked about these lessons Alex explained to me:

Me: [...] But what about token economy, what do you do?

Alex: Well, they [staff] have a file and they fill in one [the number] and such. Staff fill in and ask: are your clothes in order, hung up in the wardrobe, have you brushed your teeth, have you washed yourself and such. And clothes, are they dirty, do you keep order, have you made your bed, and I don't remember but respect is about if you have talked, if you have bad language and so, not taken anyone else's things, and food, you have to eat all that you have taken and take part in activities. [...] this is to build up your brain, so you don't forget, that you think about it.

For the last weeks Alex had received gold, the highest grade, for his behaviour at A-side. When I asked why he needed to 'build up his brain', Alex told me that it meant that he could move home, something Alex longed for.

Just to move home. You see, my mum used to come and say goodnight and now, when I'm here, when I've been away, she has walked [into my room] and said goodnight although no one is there. When I went away she didn't eat for several days. She was worried then.

At the end of the interview I asked if there was anything else Alex found important for me to know. Alex replied:

We're supervised all the time.

Alex continued and explained the places of the cameras both outdoors and indoors.

It's so they can see what we do. If someone gets hurt, they can check the cameras, who it was and what happened and so on. Someone might fall and then they can check, perhaps you say he pushed me and then they can check what really happened.

When asked what it was like to be supervised Alex said he did not bother but that it would feel strange later:

Strange, when no one looks at you anymore.

Alex's story displays an understanding of having his actions supervised in order to decide whether he can move home or not, and he seems to have felt secured and confirmed by this scrutiny. Alex's acceptance of the treatment provided was also his only chance to come home and be able to comfort his mother.

Alex's caseworker said that A-wood's assessment contributed deeper knowledge about Alex. Now she knew, 'this is Alex, this is Alex's needs', and sensed she was able to make well-informed judgements. However, when it was time for Alex to leave A-side, the caseworker was irresolute. Alex was ready to leave but the parents, despite the support provided, were not ready to take the responsibility for Alex. The caseworker found her hands tied since compulsory care could not be provided. After a few months at home Alex was again placed in out-of-home care.

More than two years after the assessment at A-wood, Alex said he did not think much about it but stated:

[without it] I wouldn't have been able to control myself as I do today.

Alex's conclusion indicates an appreciation of the assessment as a step of progress. It seems as if the external control that was provided to him was later shouldered by Alex. Although it was described in the assessment that Alex was not responsible for the difficulties, Alex took responsibility for managing them. Perhaps Alex's shouldering of self-control reflects a lesson learnt: that Alex was left to be the one in control.

Billy: 'It was all no use'

Billy came to B-hill secure accommodation after breakdowns in previous placements. In the written assessment from B-hill Billy was described as glorifying drugs, easily moving into high gear, not being able to take orders, threatening and blaming others. B-hill noted in the assessment that Billy had been temporarily isolated after being violent against youths and staff. Billy was said to keep excellent order in the room and to like physical activities. Key staff and the educator stated that Billy needed

firm structure and clear rules. Billy's intellectual ability was said to be average and he met the criteria for Asperger syndrome. Moreover, Billy scored high on depression and rage. Billy was also considered to have conduct disorder. B-hill concluded:

Billy needs an environment suited to neuropsychiatric disabilities and an environment that is able to influence Billy's attitude and use of drugs.

The parents were described as having parental abilities, but the extent of Billy's needs exceeded what could be met by the family. In the recommendations B-hill proposed a placement in secure accommodation, staff with competence in Billy's disabilities and ability to provide tailored interventions. The need for structure and clear rules was re-emphasised, along with anger management and parental involvement.

The analysis suggests that Billy's institutional identity in B-hill's assessment is twofold. First, the diagnosis of Asperger syndrome implies that Billy needs to have the environment adjusted to this difficulty. Like Alex, Billy is seen as dysfunctional and therefore not responsible for his behaviour. Billy's parents, unlike Alex's, are also relieved of responsibility. The other part of Billy's institutional identity is his violent behaviour, what is described as a conduct disorder. This diagnosis implies Billy's need to have his behaviour changed to ensure his and others' safety; it warrants a placement in secure accommodation, the only place where incarceration can be applied. This part of the institutional identity resembles what Donzelot (1979) called *the dangerous child*. The dual position of secure accommodation – as, child protection and as a protection for society (Levin, 1998) – makes it seem like a place for dangerous children, and through the recommendation this part of his institutional identity was found to be prioritised.

At the final meeting of the assessment, in which Billy chose not to participate, an emotional discussion started about how Billy's needs could be met in a secure unit, if staff had the necessary competence. While the parents were doubtful and wanted Billy to stay at B-hill, the caseworker tried to be optimistic and argued that the well-made assessment would make the difference. After the meeting the caseworker sat down with the unit manager that named a specific secure accommodation for Billy: B-stone. This was considered to be what was best. Besides, the manager explained, they needed to make place for youths waiting to be assessed. The caseworker, who had just started to handle Billy's case and never met him in person, followed the recommendations, and with no pre-visit Billy was placed at B-stone.

In our first interview, Billy was upset about the recommendation of secure accommodation. Billy thought that his behaviour at B-hill was affected by being locked up and thought that B-hill's assessment was something for the social services, not for him. Billy also found the diagnoses hard to understand. One year later Billy told me that the placement at B-stone did not turn out well. There

were drugs at the unit, minimal schooling and meaningless treatment by inexperienced staff. Together with the other peers, Billy was involved in riots that ended in police interventions and, again, temporary isolation. Billy described B-stone as ‘the worst place in the world’ and stated that it all got worse after B-hill.

I felt fooled by the social services and by B-hill, I think they were stupid. After B-hill, it all got worse.

In the interview with Billy’s caseworker, she shared his disappointment:

We were not satisfied by B-stone at all. We gave them an assignment from B-hill and they didn’t follow it through at all.

The caseworker said that she started to search for a new care arrangement, suitable for youths with Asperger syndrome, and after four months Billy moved to B-dale. B-dale had no authority of incarceration and no locked units, but what Billy described as ‘loads of rules’. He said there was a schedule for every day and phases to pass in order to gain more freedom. Billy described his progress from phase 1 to phase 3 and having managed to stay drug-free. When we talked about how he made this progress Billy said:

Well, I guess it was all the requirements they had on me and that I wanted to come home. When you stay at a locked unit, everything feels kind of hopeless since you don’t have any time, any plans for the future. Here, it feels like a step forward.

However, Billy never entirely accepted his diagnoses.

Well, that is wrong diagnosis, a touch of maybe, I can admit that, but the diagnosis, no.

When Billy looked back at B-hill’s assessment, he said he had glanced at the written document without reading it but said that it meant nothing.

Me: [...] So what happened with that [the assessment]?

Billy: Nothing. It’s the social services that helped me. They [B-hill] haven’t helped me cause they put me at B-stone and B-stone was a disaster. The social services put me at B-dale and B-dale was good.

The way B-stone had handled the assessment made Billy feel it was all meaningless:

B-stone didn’t even check what was written, what was said to be needed and things like that. That is the worst part; it was all no use.

Billy’s time in care reflects the twofold institutional identity and a care system that organised Billy’s life and varied in quality. Neither the identity nor the care provided was fully accepted by Billy.

Cecilia: 'I'm a completely changed person'

After absconding several times from home and after attempts at solutions by her caseworker, Cecilia was taken to C-croft secure accommodation with a police escort.

In C-croft's assessment Cecilia was described as having risk-taking behaviour, lack of anger management, undesirable behaviour, acting in order to get accepted, and searching for destructive peer relations. The psychologist stated an uneven intellectual ability, but within normality, and no difficulties in attention, concentration or impulsivity. Cecilia's self-esteem was considered to be high and she was described as having many good skills. Cecilia's lack of social training, being bullied and poor parenting methods were suggested as reasons for Cecilia's problems. C-croft recommended that Cecilia be provided with a firm, clear structure and support to keep the structure; role models in taking responsibility, solving conflicts and handling difficulties; an active spare time to reject destructive peer relations; social skill training; control and supervision; being acknowledged for good behaviour; and individual support in school. The recommendations also concerned a need for a changed family pattern and parenting methods. Cecilia needed to:

change her way of thinking about herself and in a social context. She needs help to change the ways she looks at herself as a vulnerable, passive youth with no ability to influence and with low responsibility.

The best chance to meet Cecilia's needs was considered to be through professional foster care.

In the written assessment Cecilia's institutional identity is related to her previous social experiences and her parents' parenting. Cecilia's institutional identity, unlike Alex's and Billy's, makes Cecilia and her family responsible and requires individual change by them. Like Espersen's (2010) identity of the damaged child, Cecilia is seen to be in need of restoration provided by professional care; a change in Cecilia's inner structure, her way of thinking, is called for.

In the final meeting the professionals at C-croft justified their recommendations and Cecilia burst into tears. Cecilia and her father only agreed on changed parental methods and argued consistently throughout the meeting that Cecilia ought to move home. The assessment team insisted on their recommendations, as the risk of additional failures was too high. The caseworker repeatedly asked Cecilia and her father how they would be able to manage if Cecilia moved back home.

Cecilia told me in the first interview how she had time at C-croft to think about her life. Cecilia's thinking convinced her about how she wanted her life to be and she found the time at the unit a hard learning process:

It is hard to be in a place like this. Even if you might learn something it is a terrible way to do it.

Me: What is being learnt?

You learn rules and how to take care of yourself and you learn never to take anything for granted. If I come home, I won't take it for granted. Before I took it for granted that I could be outdoors and on my own.

Cecilia was never placed in foster care; after nine weeks at C-croft she moved home. In our second interview Cecilia described her delight when she got to know that she was going home.

I started to cry and she [the caseworker] started to cry because she thought I was so happy. And then I ran out to the corridor and screamed –I'm going home tomorrow!

Then Cecilia told me about what happened when she came home. She was not allowed to be on her own without an adult, there was a plan for her schooling, she and her father got support from counsellors and a schedule of follow-up meetings each week was set. If she did well she would get more freedom. Cecilia said she mostly followed the plan and explained that she was a changed person.

And I started to do all they said and so. We had some fights and such and I didn't give a damn about some rules sometimes but then, I was a completely different person because when I got out I didn't take anything for granted. When you do time at such place, then you notice what you got when you're out. [...] I'm allowed to be out, thrilled by that. And. I'm a completely changed person.

Cecilia's caseworker declared that an out-of-home placement never is a solution in itself. She described the importance of getting the child motivated and of working with the family. When she decided how to support Cecilia, the assessment from C-croft was seen as a complement to her own experiences and observations of Cecilia and her family. The caseworker also emphasized the importance of social context (i.e. institution, family, school) when considering and providing support to Cecilia. She stated that C-croft's assessment provided her with a way of thinking:

We tried to have the thinking, the structure, the firm structure.

Cecilia said she read the assessment, but only once. Two years after the assessment, Cecilia concluded:

I've gained very good experience, cause I know that when life goes to hell there are people there to support you [...] I got to know myself better, my failings and faults. So, I did learn a lot about myself.

Cecilia describes an understanding of the assessment as a time for greater knowledge of herself as a person and of change. Being assessed and locked up gave Cecilia perspectives, even if it was a 'terrible way' and mainly about her failings and faults. Cecilia's institutional identity in C-croft's assessment does not seem to have coincided with hers, but in retrospect, Cecilia found trust in receiving help when needed.

Concluding discussion

The aim of this article was to explore young people's understandings of being assessed in secure accommodation, its meanings and implications for their lives. The young people – Alex, Billy and Cecilia – expressed different understandings and related differently to how they were found to be troubled. Alex appreciated the assessment, accepted and worked hard to achieve the self-control that was expected of him. Billy expressed disappointment and combated the way his troubles were institutionally understood but worked to gain independence. Cecilia, on the other hand, reflected on the experiences of being placed in care as self-development and claimed to be a changed person. Their understandings of being assessed seem to be connected to the place and the interactions during the placement, not the assessment procedures as such or the written text. However, the assessments' focus on their troubles can be seen to have implications for their understanding. In different ways they express that the transformation of their troubles into problems made them aware of their shortcomings, as pinpointed by Cecilia: 'I got to know myself better, my failings and faults.' They also have in common that their time in care demanded hard work and personal responsibility; they all learned how to adjust and do what was requested of them to get out, to come home. Their experience of constant work in care is consistent with previous research (Espersen, 2010) and in this study is found to take place in care that structured their everyday life. The three young people's different understandings raise questions about how they relate to the institutional identities presented in the assessments, the way the written assessments were acted upon and their position in the assessment process; this will now be analysed.

'Inner problems and unstructured everyday lives'

Gubrium and Holstein (2001a) claim that although it is necessary to transform complex conditions in people's lives to comprehensible institutional identities, this interpretive activity is demanding, needs to take place in each case and include a course of action. In the three cases, the institutional identities include several elements that are connected to specified treatments. Even if the youths' troubles and needs are differently described and transformed, the institutional identities of Alex, Billy and Cecilia have in common that their troubles are transformed into problems mainly within them as individuals and problems of unstructured everyday life. As a response to the two parts of the institutional identity, structure in everyday life stands out as the one solution for all. If their inner problems were understood as neuropsychiatric disorders the environment would need to be adjusted and structured; if their inner problems were understood as a lack of an inner structure (see Espersen, 2010), an inner change needed to be made by the young people through structure from the outside. The professionals' understandings of what troubled youths are lacking in life, i.e. structure, seems to be answered by having their everyday life structured and through this it is believed that their inner problems can also be restored. The interpretive activity of transforming troubles is suggested by Gubrium and Holstein (2001a:11) to be 'work that is conditioned by the setting in which it is conducted'. The studied assessments were all conducted in an artificial environment, the institution, where structure often stands out as a way to

organise everyday life for the resident peer-group. Structure can therefore be seen as a part of the institution. Thus, being involved in the collective form of living might be significant for the importance of having the young people comply with structure.

The stories of Alex, Billy and Cecilia also illustrate the flexibility of their institutional identities: Alex was later not found to have learning difficulties, the need of secure accommodation due to Billy's dangerousness faded although his behaviour was found to escalate at B-stone, and the apparent risk of failure for Cecilia did not come true. The flexible institutional identities imply at least two things: the troubles of children in care are constructed in ongoing negotiations and, as Emerson and Messinger (1977) suggest, turning troubles into problems is conditioned by the consequences of the solutions applied. When recommended interventions were provided for Alex, Billy and Cecilia, their responses seem to have made their previous institutional identities less useful to inform the professionals with a course of action.

Young people's dependency on caseworkers' text-mediated actions

Following Smith's (2007) understanding of texts, the written assessments are activated by their readers – in this study the social services departments, represented by the caseworkers. The assessments seem to have provided the caseworkers with a defined course for their actions and an understanding of the youths' troubles; the structure in the young people's everyday life can be seen as text-mediated actions by the caseworkers and other professionals. However, the caseworkers' discretion and the fact that they were not obliged to follow the recommendations made the written assessment a flexible instrument in their decision making.

For the main subjects of the assessments, the young people, activation of the text is by rejection; their reading was limited or non-existent. In the written assessments, the young people were also left with limited agency. Their limited agency in the assessment process leaves them in dependency on their caseworkers' actions, something that stresses their vulnerability in the care system (i.e. Billy's time at B-stone). Hence, the young people's involvement in the subsequent events is connected to the caseworkers' text-mediated actions, and involvement was something Alex, Billy and Cecilia sought. In their aspirations to come home, their lack of authority to act seems to have resulted in the assumption of personal responsibility for their situations. The institutional identity of their individual difficulties and unstructured lives that made them in need of structure in everyday life is therefore carried by them; this was their chance to influence their lives. However, the way in which the caseworkers chose to act upon the written assessments provided the youths with different positions. Alex's and Billy's chance for involvement was to shoulder the requested responsibility while Cecilia, in negotiations with her caseworker, was also able to influence what was going to happen after the assessment. The length of the young people's contact with their caseworkers might be significant. Alex and Billy met their caseworkers for the first time when placed or after completed assessment,

while Cecilia had had longer contact with her caseworker. That Cecilia knew her caseworker before her troubles were transformed into problems presented in the written assessment might have situated her in another position in her negotiations. Both Cecilia and her caseworker shared experiences besides the assessment at the secure accommodation. Maybe as a result of her position and how it all worked out, Cecilia expressed an assurance that life could contain good things. So, when young people's making sense of being assessed comprehensively in secure accommodations is explored, this seems rather to be related to how the written assessments were activated. The written assessment in itself had less or no meaning to the young people. Alex's, Billy's and Cecilia's different understandings – appreciation, disappointment and self-development – could therefore be understood as a result of how the written assessments were acted upon.

Conclusions, implications and contributions

The findings imply four main conclusions: first, the young people's understanding of the assessment made them aware of different parts of their shortcomings; their 'failings and faults'. Second, the institutional identity of 'inner problems and unstructured everyday life' is conditioned by the secure accommodation as an assessment environment, and a possible consequence of this artificial collective form of living structure is emphasised both in the institutional identity and in its solutions. Moreover, the institutional identities appear to be flexible, both in terms of how the young people's troubles are understood in later interventions and as an instrument for the caseworkers. Finally, the young people's perceptions of the assessment's meanings and implications for their lives are more related to how the assessments are acted upon and less to the thorough assessments and the institutional identities as such. It is through caseworkers' text-mediated actions the young people understand the meanings and implications of the assessments for their lives. Thus, young people's evolving trajectories are shaped by professionals' text-mediated actions that are influenced by the institutional identities, and by young people's reactions and responses to these actions.

Implications for practice are the need to have the institutional context considered in assessments and decisions for young people in care, and to have continuous revisions in close cooperation with young people and their families. From the analysis, we see that the young people's relationship to caseworkers might be important for their positions to negotiate and influence their situation. Thus, caseworkers who have knowledge about the process of having the young people's troubles transformed into problems, who consider the context of the assessment and make continuous revisions, are crucial for young people's involvement and for how their trajectories in care evolve. Moreover, the effort young people constantly accomplish in care needs to be acknowledged.

This article contributes a comprehension of young people's understandings of being assessed in secure accommodation and the implications of professionals' text-mediated actions. The youths' understandings should be seen as their accounts of what happened, related to specific times and places

(cf. Holstein and Gubrium, 2003). Nevertheless, the repeated interviews, together with the written assessments, interviews with caseworkers and participant observations, provide a multifaceted picture of how young people's institutional identities are constructed, acted upon and understood by those concerned.

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