

SOLUTION-FOCUSED APPROACH IN PREPARING INMATES FOR SOCIAL REINTEGRATION

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Abstract

Focusing on solution is an alternative perspective of communication, professional activities and relationship in relation to the problem-solving approach, used in social work. Looking to the future, rather than the past, the solution-focused approach affirms the right of clients to establish the desired results. It believes that change can take place in a relatively short period of time, especially when clients are empowered and motivated to use their resources and strengths to build solutions. Focusing on solution is part of the theoretical and methodological horizon, rooted in constructivism and social constructionism, which among other ideas specific to postmodernism, states that language, rather than just a medium for expressing ideas, really determines thinking, to the extent that truth is the product of language. This means that problems and solutions can be built through the communication that the social worker in the penitentiary has with inmates. Through communication, change can occur either as a difference in the way a person sees his world, or as a person doing something different, or both. This approach is also productive in communicating with the inmates in order to identify relevant and motivating objectives and solutions for behavioral rehabilitation and social reintegration.

Keywords: focusing on solution, participation, language of change, social reintegration

Résumé

Le travail propose une présentation argumentée de l'approche centrée sur la solution du point de vue de sa pertinence pratique dans l'assistance sociale pénitentiaire. Se concentrer sur la solution est une perspective alternative de communication et de relation professionnelle par rapport à l'approche de résolution de problèmes, traditionnellement utilisée en travail social. En regardant vers l'avenir plutôt que vers le passé, l'approche centrée sur la solution affirme le droit des clients d'établir les résultats souhaités. Il croit que le changement peut avoir lieu dans un laps de temps relativement court, en particulier lorsque les clients sont habilités et motivés à utiliser leurs ressources et leurs forces pour créer des

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solutions. Se concentrer sur la solution fait partie de l'horizon théorique et méthodologique, avec des racines dans le constructivisme et le constructionnisme social, qui entre autres idées spécifiques au postmodernisme, affirme que le langage, plutôt qu'un simple moyen d'expression des idées, détermine réellement la pensée, dans la mesure à laquelle la vérité est le produit du langage. Cela signifie que les problèmes et les solutions peuvent être construits par la communication que le travailleur social du pénitencier a avec les personnes privées de liberté. Grâce à la communication, le changement peut se produire soit comme une différence dans la façon dont une personne voit son monde, soit en ce qu'une personne fait de différent, ou les deux. Cette approche est également productive dans la communication avec les personnes en détention pour identifier des objectifs et des solutions pertinents et motivants pour la réhabilitation comportementale et la réinsertion sociale.

Mots-clés: concentrer sur les solutions, la participation, le langage du changement, la réintégration sociale

Rezumat

Lucrarea propune o prezentare argumentată a abordării centrată pe soluție din perspectiva relevanței sale practice în asistența socială penitenciară. Centrarea pe soluție este o perspectivă alternativă de comunicare și relaționare profesională în raport cu abordarea „problem solving”, folosită în mod tradițional, în asistența socială. Orientată spre viitor, mai degrabă decât spre trecut, abordarea centrată pe soluție afirmă dreptul clienților de a stabili rezultatele dorite. Consideră că schimbarea poate avea loc într-o relativ scurtă perioadă de timp, în special, atunci când clienții sunt împuterniciți ori motivați să își folosească resursele și atuurile pentru a construi soluții. Centrarea pe soluție se înscrie în orizontul teoretico-metodologic, cu rădăcini în constructivismul și constructionismul social, care, printre alte idei specifice post-modernismului, afirmă că limbajul, mai degrabă decât să fie doar un mediu pentru exprimarea ideilor determină în mod real gândirea, în măsura în care adevărul este produsul limbajului. Aceasta înseamnă că problemele și soluțiile pot fi construite prin comunicarea pe care asistentul social din penitenciar o are cu persoanele private de libertate. Prin comunicare, schimbarea poate apare, fie ca diferență în felul în care o persoană vede lumea, fie prin aceea că persoana face ceva diferit sau prin ambele. Această abordare este productivă și în comunicarea cu persoanele custodiate prin identificarea obiectivelor și soluțiilor relevante, respectiv motivante, în vederea reabilitării comportamentale și a reintegrării sociale.

Cuvinte cheie: focusare pe soluții, participare, limbajul schimbării, reintegrare socială

The social reintegration of former prisoners is not only for Romania, one of the biggest challenges facing correctional services, which has not yet been adequately addressed despite more or less coherent, systematic efforts with coverage in concrete and effective interventions.

As it is known, the social reintegration is an essential condition in reducing the recidivism. It is a dynamic, complex process, influenced by a mixture of

variables related not only to the personality, situation, problems, needs and resources of the prisoner, but also to criminal policies, socio-economic characteristics of the environment in which the person returns, and last but not least, the attitude, openness and involvement of the community in response to the reintegration effort of the former prisoner. Thus, the variables that influence the social reintegration can be conceptualized as being included in three areas: a) intrapersonal conditions (physical health, psychological, substance use, level of education and emotional state); b) subsistence conditions, including financial situation, employment and housing and c) support conditions, including social support, formal support services, including for the criminal justice system (Shinkfield & Graffam, 2007, p.2). Given this complexity of the conditions on which the success of social reintegration of prisoners depends, we consider it useful to seek the most productive theoretical-methodological approaches, such as in our opinion focusing on solution, which can be engaged in inmates preparation for release and social reintegration, in which, a major contribution is made by the penitentiary social work.

Prison social work is a professional approach that aims to ‘develop individual group or collective capacities to ensure social needs, increase the quality of life and promote the principles of cohesion and social inclusion’ (Social Work Law 292/2011 updated 2021, art. 2, paragraph 3). From this perspective, through specialized activities and interventions, two closely related objectives are pursued at the same time: the security of society by reducing the risk of recidivism of persons sentenced to deprivation of liberty and their social inclusion. In this sense, the constructive strategies that aim at the behavioral rehabilitation of the persons deprived of liberty by building new repertoires of pro-social actions, presuppose the participation of all the parties involved: the prisoner, specialists, community.

In the case of persons in custody, *participation* is the essential condition for overcoming criminal behavior. The main argument in this regard is expressed by the idea that „personal participation” incorporates our sense of competence, skill, power and *ability to make changes* (...) suggests a sense of control over one's life in terms of personality, understanding and motivation (...) (Krogsrud, O'Melia & DuBois, 2006, p. 116).

Thus, in social work the emphasis on participation is specific to the perspective of strengths, which orients work with beneficiaries from an excessive focus on problems (without ignoring them) which “is based on assumptions such as individual mistakes, failure, personal inadequacy and deficiency” (Weick,1983), towards exploring internal and external resources, qualities and transactions with the environment; in other words, there is a rebalancing of the relationship between problems and resources and a redirection from the past to the present and especially to the future. This *transition from what has been to what could be and what will be*, reorients our thinking on the whole process of social work practice (Krogsrud, O'Melia & DuBois, 2006, p. 113).

The change in orientation facilitates the mission of social work to empower clients to live more productive and satisfying lives. Saleebey (2007) calls his view on empowerment, *the strengths perspective* and summarizes the contributions of several authors, based on which he formulates the following basic assumptions, specific to this perspective (De Young & Berg, 2008, p. 10):

1. Despite life's struggles, all people possess strengths that can be marshaled to improve the quality of their lives. Practitioners should respect these strengths and the directions in which customers want to use them.

2. The client's motivation increases by a consistent emphasis on strengths as the client defines them.

3. Discovering strengths requires a process of cooperative exploration between clients and helpers; the expert practitioner do not have the last word on what clients need to improve their lives.

4. Focusing on strengths, turns practitioners away from the temptation to judge or blame clients for their difficulties, and toward discovering how clients have managed to survive even in the most difficult of circumstances.

5. All environments - even the most bleak, contain resources.

These considerations are also valid in the penitentiary social work, especially by applying the solution-focus approach, because inmates need to be facilitated to focus on solutions that support participation and empowerment, contributing to reducing criminal behavior and leading to a successful social reintegration.

Future oriented, rather than on the past, the solution-building approach affirms the clients right to establish the desired results. Moreover, it is believed that change can take place in a relatively short period of time, especially when beneficiaries are empowered and motivated to use their expertise to build solutions. Here by competence, we mean "the ability of any human system to fulfill its function of taking care of itself, to obtain resources from effective interaction with other systems and to contribute to the resources of its social and physical environment. Without being a fixed attribute of the person, it is the result of the transaction between 1). the person's abilities, skills and motivation, and 2). the qualities of the environment, such as social network resources, social support and requirements, obstacles and deficiencies in the ecological context" (Maluccio & Libassi, 1984, p. 52 *apud* Krogsrud, O'Melia & DuBois, 2006, pp.116-117). Which is why the role of the practitioner is to listen, to absorb information that clients provide and, subsequently, to guide them towards solutions using "the language of change" (De Jong & Berg, 2002, p. 49 *apud* Hepworth, Rooney & Dewber, 2010, p 403). Thus, the focus on solution is part of this theoretical and methodological horizon, rooted in constructivism and social constructionism which, among other ideas specific to postmodernism, states that language, rather than just an environment for expressing ideas, really determines thinking, to the extent that truth is the product of language: language constructs social reality. (Milner & O'Byrne, 2002, p. 2 *apud* Lindsay, 2009). This means that problems and solutions can be built through the conversations we have with our clients.

Through communication, change can occur either as a difference in the way a person sees his world, or as a person doing something different, or both. (George, Iveson & Ratner, 1990, p. 3 *apud* Parton & O'Byrne, 2000, p. 97; Lindsey, 2009, p. 106).

The solution-centered approach emerged as a consequence of the work of a team led by Steve De Shazer and Insoo Kim Berg at the Brief Therapy Center in Milwaukee in the 1980s. The team found out that clients often made significant positive changes following conversations about their favorite future. Moreover, when clients came up with ideas about possible solutions, sometimes they were related to problems and sometimes not. It seemed that the more the clients focused on the problems, they discovered more and bigger problems, but when they focused on the solutions, the more solutions materialized. De Shazer, Berg and the team noticed that practitioners could play a role in helping clients focus on solutions – hence the name of this theoretical-methodological perspective.

Solution focus is currently used in a variety of settings and with diverse populations, including involuntary clients. Exception-based solutions have been shown to be more successful compared to attempts to stop or change the abusive behavior of male participants (Corcoran & Franklin, 1998). Similar results appeared in a treatment of a group of male offenders, sanctioned for domestic violence. Working with them, the results showed that empowering men to identify solutions to their behavior was more effective than focusing on their violent behavior (Hepworth, Rooney & Dewber, 2010).

In a presentation of the characteristics of focusing on solution, Lindsay (2009) makes some important remarks, which I believe we can transfer and adapt in working with persons in custody in order to prepare them for release and social reintegration. The author points out that the aim of this approach is the absence of the problem or at least a reduction of its effect. “Without knowing what your problem is, I can't know that you are moving away from it and you will not know when you have reached your destination. Also, it would not be appropriate to deny the client opportunity to express his or her problem. The approach, after all, must be felt by the client as relevant. However, no solutions can be found in exploring the causes of the problem. The past is considered to be useful only in finding exceptions to the problem” (Lindsay, 2009, p.107).

Finding exceptions is an important part of the approach, it is seen as a process in which a number of techniques are used to facilitate the identification of micro-solutions, as they are also called “exceptions”. This concept proposed by De Jong & Berg refers to occasions when the problem is, or has been in the past, absent or of lesser intensity. Since nothing remains the same, there will always be times when the problems are more or less serious and stressful and so it is possible to find these exceptions.

The literature dedicated to this type of approach talks about deliberate exceptions and spontaneous exceptions (Parton & O'Byrne, 2000 *apud* Lindsey, 2009, p. 107). In the first case, the person is responsible for exceptions apparition and manifestation, while spontaneous exceptions are not the person's merit, others have contributed to their manifestation or are due to luck. In the

penitentiary social work our interest is for the generation of those micro-solutions/ deliberate exceptions, because they develop in the client a feeling of self-efficacy and empowerment. Regarding self-efficacy, understood as confidence in one's own ability to perform a certain task, it is worth noting that especially in working with involuntary clients, it is a good predictor of the possibility of change and the persistence of willingness for change. And if we take into account the fact that self-efficacy is specific to each task or change, it is important to emphasize the important role of the prison social worker who through the professional relationship / therapeutic alliance, creates for prisoners concrete opportunities for self-determination (by operationalizing certain values such as confidentiality, respect for the uniqueness and dignity of the person, or by engaging in communication skills that allow prisoners to choose how they answer questions or relate their situation). At the same time, the way they are perceived by the social worker, the confidence of the specialist in self-efficacy, the competence of the prisoner, facilitates the development of motivation for change because it talks about hope. Hope is a special resource for the development and capitalization of which a cooperation between inmates and the social worker is desirable.

The penitentiary social worker in accordance with his / her professional roles (evaluator, facilitator, trainer, mediator, case manager, counselor, etc.), aims to maximize the participation of the prisoner in each of the activities and programs carried out in support of behavioral rehabilitation and preparation for their release and social reintegration, according to the Individualized evaluation, educational and therapeutic intervention plan. As the creators of solution-centered approach explain, participation means, on the one hand, putting the client in the position of an expert in his own life, and on the other hand, you as a practitioner must know how to stay away from your reference framework, as much as possible, and to explore the client's, that is, to learn to adopt *the position of not knowing*. This term, say De Young and Berg (2008), belongs to two other authors Anderson and Goolshian (1992) who claim that the practitioner never knows a priori the significance of the client's experiences and actions. Instead, it must be based on the client's perceptions and explanations, placing his reference frame at the center of the communication.

De Young and Berg (2008) identify basic communication skills that allow practitioners to be informed by clients. Some of the skills are unique to solution-centered approach, others are not (p. 20). Here is one of these communication / interviewing skills and techniques illustrated by some of the activities carried out in the penitentiary by social workers together with the prisoners.

Listening to clients means from the perspective of the practitioner, in our case of the social worker in the penitentiary, to avoid the evaluative thoughts related to the interviewer's frame of reference. We listen to the client's narration from his / her point of view. That is, we are within his / her frame of reference. When you start listening, De Young and Berg say, the emphasis should be on *who and what is important to the client* (p. 21). Thus the practitioner focuses on the

most important parts of the client's frame of reference. Thus, the tendency of some pre-comprehensions is stopped, and a premature formulation of the solution is prevented, made from the point of view of the practitioner.

A key role of the penitentiary social worker is that of evaluator. The assessment activity is a process by its nature, that covers all the stages that make up the custodial sentence: the initial evaluation during the quarantine period, periodic evaluations during the execution of the sentence / measure of hospitalization in a re-education center, the final evaluation during the period of probation for release). Regardless of the time or purpose of the evaluation, a series of communication/interviewing skills and techniques are employed that make possible the collection of data, their analysis and interpretation. Questions have an essential contribution to these activities. Regarding the wording of the questions, Witkin (1999) invoked by De Young and Berg, made the following statement "Listen to the questions people ask and you will have a good idea about what they think, what they value and what they want to achieve/realize". Thus, the process of asking and answering questions often creates *a new awareness* among the participants and *new possibilities* for the future. Therefore, the solutions are built the fastest when the interviewers / social workers formulate their questions according to this principle. For example, open-ended questions transfer both control and responsibility to clients; they are also consonant with the "not knowing" technique. At the same time, they give clients more opportunities to choose what they say about themselves and how they do it (De Young & Berg, 2008). Engaging in open-ended communication is a way to promote self-determination, so important especially for involuntary clients such as persons in custody. The use of open-ended questions, those of concretization, especially the miracle question, coping or scaling questions, the last three, specific to focusing on the solution, is especially productive in terms of detailing and nuance the client's perspective. These details contribute to the efficient construction of the solution.

The iconic interview technique for focusing on the solution, considered particularly effective in avoiding blocking communication around the problem and focusing on how they were, or would be in the absence of the problem (e.g., alcohol consumption, lack of work, criminal behavior etc.), is *the technique of the miracle question*. Through it, the social worker focuses together with the prisoner on what he / she wants to be different in his/her life, and then on how this can happen. Once the prisoner has formulated what he / she would like to see differently, the next task for the social worker is to open the communication to the most concrete formulations regarding how the person sees his/her life when the problem is solved. In the solution-centered approach, this communication approach is called the process of developing well-formed goals (Berg & Miller, 1992 *according to* De Young & Berg, 2008, p. 77).

Another skill that reflects this principle related to details is the repetition of clients' keywords, that is, encouraging. The keywords are the ones that clients use to capture the experiences and the meanings that they give to this experience.

Client: Family for me is something different. Social worker: Something different? We therefore find that language is the main means by which clients transmit/reveal their own frame of reference. That is why in building the solution it is essential that the social worker listens carefully to what words the clients choose and use. (De Young & Berg, 2008, p. 25).

Establishing the objectives, a particularly important aspect in many of the programs carried out in the penitentiary, can benefit from the application of this way of engaging communication skills. The cantonment of communication in the prisoners' frame of reference, the identification and awareness of new perspectives, different from reporting to the situation and the awareness of alternative solutions that are generated by capitalizing on positive experiences and strengths, facilitates the configuration of objectives related to prosocial change.

Therefore, we consider the solution-centered approach relevant in working with prisoners in order to prepare them for release, because through its very core idea (focusing on strengths, positive rather than problematic experiences, future orientation, use of the language of change and the emphasis on the participation of the prisoners), this approach can help to outline more quickly, in detail and better folded on resources, relevant objectives in a realistic post-detention social reintegration plan.

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