

Psychotherapy with Adolescents in Switzerland

Speech in Kampala, Uganda, Makerere University, 1997

Eva Winizki, Zürich

Introduction: Why do young people in Switzerland voluntarily seek psychotherapy? Symptoms and background conflicts during the transitional period in which adolescents move away from their families and move toward integration into the outside world in the Swiss culture. Challenges the West European culture sets to adolescents. How can psychotherapy help to solve these conflicts? Eva Winizki, Kampala, Nov. 1997

The main reason for young people to come for therapy to us is because they have problems in the family (60%). I'll talk about these various problems later. Secondly, problems at school or the place of work (44%). Thirdly, psychic problems such as depression, eating disorders, various psychosomatic illnesses, the after effects of sexual abuse (24%). Fourthly, questions about legal rights, financial problems (20%) and the fifth reason is addiction (10%).

There are significantly more girls than boys (66% girls / 34% boys), the average age is about 18, however there are quite a number of 16-year-olds who seek psychotherapy voluntarily. Most are still in an apprenticeship, 2/3 are Swiss, 1/3 are from other countries. (These statistics have been taken from the report of the Zurich Youth Advisory Board, 1995/96. In the survey participants could choose more than one reason).

Adolescence - the rite of passage

Youngsters poised between family and society.

In order to understand why youngsters of about 15 years of age and upwards choose to come to us for psychotherapy of their own accord, it might be helpful to know more about our society and the role played by the family within this culture. During the workshop we will be discussing and comparing the difference between growing-up in our society and growing-up in your society.

We, as professional therapists, define the term Youth in two ways: On one hand puberty and on the other adolescence.

Puberty is the physical sexual development. The moment puberty begins is rarely capable of being personally influenced.

Adolescence is the development of the inner emotions mirrored against the experiences and relationships of the outside world. Adolescence is a psycho-social process which mainly takes place in the family. However school, apprenticeship and recreational activities away from the family in the context of her/his own peer group also play an important role in forming and shaping the inner person.

The personal readiness during this adolescent phase to move away from the family can be influenced by the youngsters both consciously and unconsciously. In most cases this development is supported by identifying with the chosen profession or by falling in love. Both occurrences are no longer measured by family norms, for in our culture it is accepted that young people choose their own profession and their own partners. Under Swiss federal law the right of the child to choose his own way is even guaranteed.

However, should difficulties arise in the family during the adolescent's transition from dependency to independence and attempt to impede this process, these youngsters, particularly those living in urban areas may choose to seek psychological help.

Nonetheless, the impediments to the process of becoming independent are not as such identified as the reasons for seeking psychotherapy, since they are not as evident to them at that moment. Rather they will focus on a symptom as an explanation of the difficulties being experienced: conflict or vague dissatisfaction with their parents, issues concerning curfew or pocket money, violence at home, difficulties at school or at home, addiction, feelings of depression, sleeping problems, social isolation, eating disorders, etc.

Once the psychotherapy starts to take hold then the process of attaining independence from the family is initiated and supported. The therapist accompanies this process and helps the young person to find him- or herself.

You are almost certainly asking yourselves why, in our society, there is such a need to attain independence from the family. This is, after all, not the case in all cultures.

Typical of adolescence in our highly industrialised society is that ambivalence develops between family and society.

Sigmund Freud, the father of psychoanalysis, who laid the foundation during the present century for our European attitude towards emotional development, described in 1930 the relationship between family and society as an insoluble paradox, I quote.: "The family is not willing to release its offspring..... The process of the developing independence from the family then becomes a challenge for every youngster. The

solution is often found in the rituals which society offers supporting the initiation and integration of young people."

While it is still true today, that the family wishes to stay together as an institution, there are no longer the societal rituals to which Freud referred to support this process. Allow me to explain this, since it is the source of a basic conflict for our adolescents.

What is the function of the family, and what are the demands that our culture places on adolescents?

In most societies **the family is the keeper of social conventions (traditions)**, and therefore by nature conservative. During the formative years, parents teach their children the fundamental skills which they believe will be necessary in adult life. Since parenting is not learnt in school through application of scientific findings, parents tend to pass on their own experiences and behaviour patterns stemming from the time of their own bringing-up and adolescence. They hope that this traditional wisdom will suffice in enabling their children to cope with the demands imposed by the structures of society.

On the other hand **society demands innovativeness**. In order to become adult, youngsters have to develop their own abilities, abilities which they need to deal with real-life situations outside of their family. The traditional methods of upbringing used in the family, however well-intentioned, very often do not equip youngsters with the tools to meet today's needs. Not as a result of ill-will but because times change very quickly. The anthropologist Margaret Mead once said, and I quote.: "In earlier times (say; about 150 years ago, before the industrial revolution), it was possible even for grandchildren to use the same conflict-solving solution as had been handed down through the family from their grandparents. Today it is proving difficult to use solutions directly observed by the adolescents during their childhood which were used by their own parents." The more the difference between the life-styles of the generations grow, the less chance there is that past experiences of the parents can be used as a basis for the future of their children. This is why the process of becoming independent from their parents is necessary for young people.

We live in a **rapidly accelerating culture**, in which an answer to current conflicts can rarely be found in past situations: The increasing computerisation with internet connections, growing complexity of communications and telecommunications systems, our mobility, which instantaneously brings alien cultures and outlooks into our homes, the impact of technology on the workplace, the uncontrolled financial markets: All these immense changes have taken place within less than half a century. With time so accelerated, initiation and other rituals cannot keep pace. The absence of these rituals leads to uncertainty during adolescence.

Those **traditional ritualised systems** within our culture, such as **the military** (in which all male youngsters start a compulsory 4-month training at the age of 20), **the public**

school system (9 obligatory years) and **the church** which all offer societal rituals intended to slow the acceleration of change, are no longer sacrosanct in the minds of young people. Neither the military, school or church is capable any longer of ritually integrating adolescents into our society.

Virtually only extremely rigid and closed groups in the society, such as religious sects and paramilitary groups in their nature as complete movements can offer rituals. The functioning of these groups depends on their narrow set of beliefs, their insistence on total obedience and on the willingness of their members to sacrifice individuality and to take on slavish obedience to a guru figure. The price is social isolation, emotional stagnation and very often, sexual abuse and violence. Our society faces too many existential problems to afford to tolerate such groups. We need self-reflecting adolescents to be creative and innovative in problem solving.

This **De-ritualisation** of our culture leads to a core conflict for the adolescents: They are forced to make a move from the family into the outside of culture on their own, through individual self-reflexion. In the process of achieving autonomy from the family they are often left alone. The parents can often no longer be of assistance, the teachers are preoccupied with their lessons. A truly difficult situation!

The regulation of chaos plays an important part in this process. Chaos is the state in which a much needed recovery from an overly structured culture is possible. Mario Erdheim, an anthropologist and psychoanalyst in Zurich, has specialized his research in the study of adolescence. His theories which are very convincing to me, suggest that **our society has individualised chaos**. We live in such a thoroughly structured, pre-planned and organised every-day routine from which we can barely recover. Already fourth grade pupils have to keep agendas so as not to miss any appointments. Pre-planning is not only now restricted to work, both family life and leisure time are becoming more and more structured. We no longer have times where order is ritually interrupted just as we no longer have time as a society for ritualised games. In order to relax and recover from work a less organised family life and leisure time would not only be sensible but necessary. It is hardly surprising that substances such as Ecstasy or Marijuana have the powerful fascination which they have for our young people: both make the time structures of the real world disappear.

Today youngsters no longer can find security through rituals; there is little societal consensus about what is good and what is bad. There are few positive role models. They are left to their own devices, relying on their own self-reflexion in order to orient their insecurities in a more meaningful direction. They are forced to devise their own behavioural patterns and conflict resolution strategies in order to successfully

emancipate themselves from the security of the family and to meet the high expectations of our pluralistic world. For many youngsters the solution lies in their identification with such currently popular youth groups such as the HipHop-scene, Skinheads, the Techno-scene, Teddies, Punks, Italo-, Skater-scene, Hippies or Hangers. They might go to a sports club or join the scout movement. All these groups have devised their own rituals. Here they find values and attitudes as well as forms of expressions, which are consistent. For example, how to react as consumers, what clothes to wear, which hairstyle, physical shape, how leisure time is spent, which music is listened to, how to approach the opposite sex.

Being a member of such a group stabilises the own identity. It is not unusual to change groups a few times during this adolescent period, although each change requires the acceptance of the new life-style. These varying cultures are more or less part of the whole culture. They replace the family clan. Youngsters who do not belong to such a clique are often lonely and isolated.

In addition to the recuperative involvement with chaos (=unplanned free-time) **fantasies of grandiosity** play an important role in helping to deal with the high demands placed by society. How do such fantasies of grandiosity unfold?

The child is small and wants to be big. To be like its father or mother or like grandma or grandpa. It is often helpless, is always falling down, blunders, knows less. So without the help of the grown-ups it cannot be so grand, which is hurtful. It cannot yet live out the fantasies of being big because they are so insulting. Therefore the child delegates these fantasies onto its parents and other grown-ups until it enters its own period of adolescence. The parents become larger than life and the child identifies itself with them, in order to make the pain of being imperfect easier to bear. Children idolise their parents. This is an important process, because the child cannot develop its fantasies of grandiosity without the administration of its parents. At the time of adolescence the youngsters then have to withdraw these delegated fantasies from their parents in order to cope with the complex problems outside of the family. This leads to a **de-idealisation of the parents**, which is generally very hurtful ("now they only come home to eat, sleep and pick up their pocket-money"). Parents in our society have to live with the frustration of seeing that their children choose to live differently than they. (Sometimes they need psychological help too. I offer than family-therapy). Often youngsters who come into psychotherapy because they could not idolise their parents.

In past centuries we delegated these fantasies of grandiosity onto royalty; they were rarely lived out by the common people. The nobility was celebrated, just as still today the reigning queen in England is venerated. Today however, wealth is all around us. We now live like the nobility in mediaeval times. There has been an explosion of grandiosity fantasies. The world has opened up. Particularly young people, poised as

they are between their childish fantasies of grandiosity and the grandiose fantasy of grown-ups are confused between the reality of the world which they are trying to enter and the fantasy world being presented.

Today everything can be bought, instantly; contact can be made everywhere. Thirty years ago we had to wait until our teens to afford luxury; today, the advertising industry targets 5-year-olds, who in turn have quite a big say in what the family does or does not buy. Young people's grandiosity is being appealed to earlier and earlier, causing them to be overwhelmed. Whereas in earlier times, fantasies were generally fulfilled through work and discipline, today it is often merely a question of the young person's willingness to fulfill its desires. Today, it is only necessary to earn enough money and have enough vacation time to realise most fantasies. Desires, sparked through advertising become inflationary and no longer relate to basic needs. This leads to feelings of discontent. Young people come into psychotherapy for this reason as well.

In our society, status and approval are attained mainly through work. Until now, work helped in transforming fantasies of grandiosity. To have a career is still a main target, especially for male juveniles, but more and more for females too. If work is not idealised, if a career is not possible, if youngsters are not interested in their work or cannot find a job, or look upon a job only as a means of earning money (this happens more and more), then the grandiosity fantasies are transferred to leisure-time consumption and to relationships. During leisure time one can fly, book adventure holidays, jump into a deep valley on a rubber rope, fly away in winter to a warm beach, when bored and undecided a stand-by ticket is to be had at the airport for whatever destination is available. One only needs money and that requires employment. But it leaves no lasting sense of contentment; at best, a brief, momentary feeling of satisfaction which later will need repeating.

The world of relationships is used to fulfill those over-dimensional desires which work can not satisfy: Relationships must be relaxing, amusing, wild, varied, adventurous, erotic and sexually fulfilling, offering both deep discussions, being both committed and independent. The relationship must not, under any circumstances, be boring, frustrating, quiet, platonic, monotonous, complicated or conflicted. Naturally such high expectations in relationship must lead to disappointment. If frustrations cannot be tolerated and if they have no tools for solving conflicts then the result is usually a separation and the start of a new relationship. One begins to consume relationships as if they were market goods. In Switzerland, over 30% of marriages end in divorce.

These descriptions will give you a better understanding of the difficulties our young people (as well as we us grown-ups) face in our culture in becoming adults. It is not my intention to idealise the rituals of previous times, because there is no way to return to

pre-industrial times. We are in the midst of a process of escalating expansion, which we cannot just stop. But I'd like to describe the important role psychotherapy can play for adolescents in this context.

1. Psychotherapy has to offer juveniles a protective framework from which they can explore the conflict between family and societal interests. This means that psychotherapists must become a positive projection figure. I gain the trust of the youngsters by listening and fully understanding their problems from their standpoint. In individual therapy it is not my task to identify with the parents, trying to continue the process of childrearing, but to try to understand the adolescent from his/her point of view and support his/her feelings. These feelings are always okay. I become a mirror of the youngster's true self: the self which, at the beginning of life, felt secure in the rightness of its needs (hunger, tiredness, love etc.). In this way I give him/her support as well as the "good parent messages" it needs: I see you and I hear you, you can trust me, you can trust your inner voice, you are special to me, you don't have to be afraid anymore, I accept you even when you are different from me, etc. These messages offer the bases for self-confidence which is needed in order to begin the therapeutic work related to the problems being presented.

Clearly, I am bound as a psychotherapist by an oath of silence; I may not divulge information to third parties about our discussions. Should the parents request information from me, I refer them back to their adolescent. The youngsters should decide just what they want to tell or not to tell their parents. During their process of emancipation, I must not infantilise them.

2. Psychotherapy must support the adolescents in their endeavours to overcome their guilt feelings towards their parents because they question their behaviour patterns and values. It is part of my task to remind these young people that they have the right to be different to their parents and can still love them. Parents often give their children non-verbal messages that they will only be loved when they do what they are told. This leads to a disastrous pattern: I am only okay when I am as you expected me to be. Every deviation from this regulation leads to a feeling of guilt. I have to find the way to disconnect this perception from the assumed message, otherwise they will not learn to think for themselves and will remain tied to their parents. The aim of every psychotherapy with adolescents is to establish with them the realisation that their connectedness to their parents can certainly exist even when they are autonomous. This is how we understand autonomy: Independence with commitment, self-confidence while sustaining contact.

3. Through psychotherapy, adolescents can discover their own fantasies of grandiosity and then, step by step, transform them into everyday reality. Young people who, within the confines of the family, have suffered or continue to suffer from

violence or sexual abuse, adapt themselves to a prescribed role of submission, both out of fear and in the hope of somehow eventually being accepted and loved. During therapy they not only confront their traumas but also have to redevelop their self-confidence and discover their fantasies of grandiosity. They cannot become adult as long as they perceive themselves as victims or identify themselves with the perpetrator. Mostly it takes years to reestablish a healthy self-confidence.

Those youngsters who have ill, invalid or emotionally unstable parents learn during therapy to cope with the parents' expectations that they must be their caretakers. In our society supporting or nursing parents is not looked upon as being the task of adolescent children. It is expected to be done by adult friends of the parents or psychologically trained professionals such as psychotherapists, family or couple therapists. If young people are forced to "parent" their parents then they cannot become emancipated and will remain bound to the home. They can no longer pursue their own development.

4. During psychotherapy youngsters learn that they also have a right to keep secrets from their parents. Having secrets is an important part of growing up. A child tells its parents everything. It needs their reaction and their evaluation of the situation. During the process of moving from the family into society, secrets help to form new alliances with peers, to which parents cannot involve themselves. With their first secrets, children and adolescents create their own world. In therapy they learn that this is not being disloyal towards their parents.

5. In psychotherapy youngsters can talk about their sexual problems and find possibilities for a satisfying sexual behaviour. Sexuality does not belong in the family. That is why incest is taboo. The family has to open up. This process begins at the latest when the youngsters fall in love. However intimacy with a lover also brings with it many problems: Feelings of abandonment if the beloved is not near enough, or perhaps seems uncommitted. Feelings of being overwhelmed when the loved one comes too close. Psychotherapy supports the young people in finding the right balance of closeness and distance.

6. Psychotherapy accompanies the youngsters through the school and workplace conflicts. To be successful in one's work requires more than having a grandiose fantasy about it. One is confronted daily with conflicts, disappointments and unfulfilled desires. Psychotherapy helps adolescents to find their own solutions.

To be successful psychotherapies depend upon society. There have to be adequate places for education, training programmes and apprenticeships, as well as for living. In February 1997, we had 5.4% unemployed youngsters in Switzerland, a total of 35 400. Every 5th unemployed person is a adolescent. This presents a situation which tests the limits of psychotherapy.