

# Targeted and Group-Specific Social Work Interventions in the Area of Tension Between the Reproduction of Hierarchical Structures and the Sensitivity Towards Differences

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In the following, a campaign for the prevention of violence is used as a practical example to discuss peer-education programmes. By using this example, the article attaches particularly high importance to the potential of campaigns involving the prevention of violence to children and young adults. These campaigns aim to help children and young adults raise their self-confidence, successfully overcome conflict situations and ensure a non-violent future, for example, in future relationships. These campaigns, therefore, also aim to restrain domestic violence. This article focuses on the challenges social workers are confronted with when identifying criteria for the categorization, and thus the composition, of peer-education groups.

## 1. Peer-education programmes in the area of tension between the reproduction of hierarchical structures and the sensitivity towards differences

Peer education is an approach with which specific community members are supported in promoting change among their peers. It is about the teaching and sharing of information, values and behaviour in educating others who may share similar social backgrounds or life experiences (Backett-Milburn, 2000; Topping, 2005). Rather than social work professionals educating members of the public, the idea behind peer education is that ordinary people are in the best position to encourage others. Research on peer education shows that peer-led interventions are likely more accepted and thus more successful than teacher/social worker-led interventions in this target group because of the high relevance of peer groups during adolescence (Lazarus, Sihvonon-Riemenschneider, Laukamm-Josten, Wong, & Liljestrang, 2010). Because of this high relevance, children and young adults are increasingly included in extracurricular pedagogical practice as experts and decision makers. As a result, the peer-education approach is used to stimulate and steer education and developmental processes by using the relationship between peers and their interaction system. Because adolescence and puberty are important phases of individuation, integrated in a dialectic of separation and binding, of detachment and integration, these phases represent a hub of different relationship (binding) modalities (Hatami, Kazemi, & Mehrabi, 2015; Klosinski, 2004, p77). Indeed, Klosinski as well as Schröder point out that these stages of life have the inherent risk of (re)producing and

manifesting hierarchical social structures, gender stereotypes, xenophobia, and misogyny. These (re)productions and manifestations, furthermore, reinforce differentiations originating from a peer-education conception which is sensitive towards (social) differences (Kaufmann, 2000; Klosinski, 2004, p77; Najcevska, 2000; Schröder, 2004, p111; Tillner, 2000).

Although the problem areas are known in research on peer-education, there is neither a critical theoretical nor a critical empirical examination concerning how hierarchical structures can be addressed and combatted (Thurn, 2014, p194). To outline the area of tension in peer education between the sensitivity to differences and the reproduction of these differences, this article focuses on the question of whether peer education enables a living-world-oriented participation which is sensitive to differences, or if social exclusion – or the reproduction and manifestation of social hierarchical structures – might be perpetuated through peer education.

In the following article, the area of tension in peer education between the consideration of categories of difference and the reproduction of hierarchical structures is outlined alongside the central category of 'gender'. As a first step, the justification and legitimation of difference is introduced (2). Based on this, three essential dimensions of distinction and their meanings in relation to peer education are outlined (3). Subsequently, the dimension of the 'gender' distinction is approximated by using the practical example of the Swiss peer-education project 'Peacemaker' (4). The approximation is based exemplarily on the mono-educative round table of the programme (5). The article ends with a conclusion (6).

## 2. Categories of differences and peer-education projects

Peer education aims to impart knowledge and a positively connoted self-concept which can be strengthened within the peer group. For this purpose, peer education builds upon the relation and the immediate communication structure of peers. This allows children and young adults to address current tasks in developing individuation in childhood and adolescence at eye level (from peer to peer). Peer education is based on insights from peer research which suggest that joint peer-to-peer cooperation leads to better outcomes and that, within the scope of such a negotiation of problem-solving strategies, a sustainable recognition and even behavioural change can be achieved (e.g. Backett-Milburn, 2000). The aim of a peer-education project is the desire for positive change of all persons involved, which can be achieved through active participation of young adults. Overarching objectives of peer education are *inter alia* a general life competency through the support of social competences, the ability to work in a team, as well as the learning of strategies for conflict resolution (Abdi & Simbar, 2013; Denison et al., 2012). A significant opportunity for peer education is seen because it is not adults but peers who contradict the adolescents. Peer-education approaches assume that age homogeneity

builds confidence, which is of high relevance for the learning process. This assumption, however, implies that a symmetry of power prevails within peer-relationship structures caused by age homogeneity, and that this symmetry of power is credited as a central aspect of the success of peer education. The central question is: is a peer group only connected through age homogeneity, or are young adults alike and therefore 'equal'?

Studies which have examined hegemonic conflicts and power structures within the relations of young adults in connection with peer education point out that hierarchies within peer groups represent a considerable problem and therefore, besides age, other social, cultural, and economic aspects – as categories of differences – play an important role in the success of peer groups and hence must also be considered (Heyer, 2010, p410). In addition to that, Thole and Hüblich (2014) emphasise that both the process and success of peer projects depend on different variables stemming from the backgrounds of the young adults, such as class, milieu, social stratum and education.

### 3. Living-world orientation or social exclusion with peer education

The following section details several primary categories of distinction related to peer education, taking into account several studies on peer education (e.g. Backett-Milburn, 2000; Hatami et al., 2015; Stephenson et al., 2008).

#### ***a. Categories of differentiation in social status within the group***

Because of structural differences in social relationships (peer relationships vs. family connections), young adults can attribute the credit for their own social position within the group to themselves; and because peers can initiate the beginning and the end of their social relations, the recognition or the withdrawal of it has significant importance. It is therefore when children and young adults are well-liked that they are generally socially skilful, have a better ability to fit into a social group and can rapidly establish new contacts. Thus, these children and young adults in the target group possess social intelligence as well as the broad acceptance of a group leader (Abdi & Simbar, 2013). In relation to peer education, this acceptance is judged as a fundamental precondition. Since 'popularity' plays a crucial role when social workers choose the multiplier of peer education, it has a high priority for the success of a project. As a result, social status represents a category of differentiation. Furthermore, well-liked children and young adults are attributed with a pronounced pro-social behaviour, which can contribute to mitigating tension within a group and to the well-being of weaker group members (Backett-Milburn, 2000; Denison et al., 2012; Stephenson et al., 2008).

#### ***b. Categories of differentiation: class affiliation and migration***

Due to class origins and/or migration-specific differentiations (and the diminished educational opportunities implied therein), children and young adults require help to participate (Abdi & Simbar, 2013). To achieve this, peer education offers at least some

individual programme components that should address the needs of the target group directly by using the previously mentioned differentiations. This would allow strengthening the self-confidence of targeted persons as much as it enables them to participate, and hence spare them the experience of discrimination.

### ***c. Categories of differentiation: gender***

*Gender is not what we are but something that we do. It is an attribution of difference, which is created in everyday interaction and reciprocal interpretation processes.*

(Gildemeister 2008)

Few distinctions are made in daily life with such implicitness as the determination of gender and the classification of it (Kågesten et al., 2016). Social scientific theories, however, are critical towards the differentiation of the genders. Therefore, from a scientific point of view (concept of gender construction), the two-gender hegemony is considered as the result of historical development processes and of a continuous social practice, which repeatedly contribute to the reproduction of theories of everyday life about the two-gender hegemony (Wetterer, 2010, p126). As a result, the category of gender is broadly underlined by the concept of social differentiation and is determined by it:

*Such a proposition is changing the point of view fundamentally and forces us to reflect as well as to rethink, such as how physical differences are treated differently socially. Maybe these differences are just socially produced?*

(Gildemeister & Robert, 2008, p7)

## **4. Practical example: The ‘Peacemaker’ project**

The ‘Peacemaker’ project aims to mitigate and prevent violence in schools in Switzerland. During project weeks, students and teachers discuss violence and peace. In seventy ‘Peacemaker’ programmes, students elect classmates, who then learn how to mediate in conflict situations and with that to ease such situations. Important aspects and overarching goals of ‘Peacemaker’ are therefore awareness-raising and sensitization about the culture of dispute and the dynamics of violence in their own school environments, as well as confronting the various definitions of ‘violence’ and the hardening of viewpoints that allow acts of violence to occur. Additionally, students and teachers develop non-violent abilities to solve conflicts. For the section leader of ‘Peacemaker’, the differentiation of genders is *the* central category of differentiation. He states that: ‘... prevention of violence is impossible if gender differences are not duly considered’. The following section, therefore, discusses the prevention of violence and the development of conflict-resolution strategies in the context of gender relations. It considers how, within the framework of ‘Peacemaker’ in schools but also in the

framework of military recruit schools, homosocial areas of activity in the form of gender-homogenous discussion groups are created and institutionalized.

For further information please visit <https://www.ncbi.ch/fr/projets/peacemaker/>

## 5. Conflict-resolution strategies and prevention of violence in gender relations

The section leader explains the high relevance of gender differentiation to peer-education projects involved with the prevention of violence, such as 'Peacemaker', by the fact that boys and girls perceive, interpret, and use violence differently. He is convinced that a gender-specific differentiation of interventions is an absolute precondition for the successful prevention of violence. A key consideration of his foundational discourse is that boys and girls are discussing differently, and particularly more openly, about violence and feelings in a gender-homogenous group. He also places differential importance on the functionality of violence because it is influenced by, if not conditional to, gender. For example, he argues that men already become accustomed and prepared to be roughhoused and violent by other men early in life. Therefore, within 'Peacemaker' programmes, discussion groups in which violence is a focal point are separated by gender. This separation is justified by the different communication and violence cultures of the sexes.

Yet, it is precisely this approach which can reproduce and manifest these (perceived) differences. In a mono-educational approach, for example, interaction between the two sexes cannot take place in such a setup and therefore cannot be practised, although gender-heterogeneous settings belong to normality in all key areas of society, and hence, no opportunity is offered to overcome stereotyping and to break down prejudices (Kågesten et al., 2016). Therefore, mono-educational approaches bear the risk that conflict-resolution strategies are only developed within the same sex. Consequently, it has been problematised that the 'gender' category of differentiation bears the risk of reproduction and manifestation due to gender separation within the framework of peer education, particularly in adolescence, an important phase of individuation (Klosinski, 2004, p77). Schröder(2004, p111) emphasised that this type of project reproduces and manifests gender stereotypes due to separation and stressing differences, and that misogyny might arise out of this.

Furthermore, critical experts problematize these differentiations into female and male groups so that it could even lead to violence because often female groups are addressed as potential 'victims of male aggression' and male groups are addressed as potential perpetrators. In order to substantiate the claim that violence produces hegemonic masculinity, Fuchs, Lamnek, Luedtke, and Baur (2009) reviewed bright as well as dark field studies on violence. In both studies, perpetrators of violence are predominantly

male. The authors argue that violence might serve to create or maintain an inner identity, particularly for certain groups of male young adults. Consequently, it can be argued that violence is an integral part of the transitory phase of these male young adults and that they try find an independent male identity with it. The act of violence, therefore, is a development of a gender-role identity.

What consequences do these considerations have for the concept of gender-homogenous discussion groups of the peer-education project? Although gender differentiations are considered in science as socially constructed, these (perceived) differentiations and the discourse about them in the field of practice and daily life are omnipresent. Girls and adolescent girls are exposed to different social controls and sanctions. Furthermore, they structure their behaviour in accordance with social desirability, which itself is directly coupled to gender roles (Popp, 2003). It is in this sense that one must understand and comprehend 'Peacemaker' emphasis on mono-educative discussion groups. The omnipresence and ubiquitous relevance of the two-gender hegemony and the resulting dichotomous social practices in everyday life as well as 'common knowledge' about the dualism of men and women stand in opposition to the political and social semantics of equality. To follow the everyday theory and hence to meet and address the expectations of the life worlds of young adults, a gender differentiation may be necessary. With the political semantics of equality, gender must be made relevant because from this perspective the contextual contingency of the 'gender' category increases (Heintz & Nadai, 1998, p88). For example, studies in which young males were individually questioned on their attitudes towards women suggested that hierarchical demarcation and differentiation with respect to girls and women are practically negligible. However, if attitudes and everyday practices are examined in a homosocial group context (with young men) and not individually, the picture is distinctively different (Winter & Neubauer, 1998, p154).

With its discussion groups, 'Peacemaker' particularly pays attention to this group context. Male homosocial action fields are created as social spaces in which male gender identity can be created and manifested (Bourdieu, 1998). Since the distinction towards the world of women and the conjunction between men are paramount for male identity development, peer groups as a rule are the first homosocial spaces for young adults to practice this distinction, 'Peacemaker' starts with peer-education discussion groups on a relevant point. However, homosocial communities of men might also function as amplifiers of hegemonic masculinity and therefore might be a collective actor in the construction of difference and the manifestation of distinction (Meuser, 2010, p430). If these ambiguities and the disparate expectations of the environment and the homosocial group are a subject of group discussion, the creation of a homosocial space can represent an important aspect of identity development, as they may counter uncertainties and stimulate a change in values, especially in extracurricular education.

Against this background, it is particularly striking that the literature hardly addresses the relevance of such homosocial action areas for girls and female adolescents. Especially with regard to peer culture, this desideratum for research is justified by the masculine peer culture being reasonably less compatible with the demand for the schooling of a certain behaviour than the feminine peer culture. This therefore is why the gender-conscious and gender-homogenous work relating to girls has come visibly under pressure in recent years in Europe (Wallner, 2010).

In the context of peer-education projects and the prevention of violence, girls and young women are encouraged, typically in gender-homogenous groups, to discuss their experience of violence at schools and daily life. It is understood that in many fields of life, girls and young women are confronted with male violence. This approach, however, is not normally justified with the identity-formatting and development-supporting functionality of the homosocial group formation. The justification is rather oriented to deficits. That, therefore, is why the work with girls and young women is legitimized by the fact that they would be discriminated against in a coeducational teaching environment, due to both the ostensible demonstrations of superiority by boys and young men, as well as due to role expectations. Besides strengthening the self-esteem and the self-assertion of addressees, gender segregation also ought to provide the possibility for the addressees to take responsibility and articulate their own interests (Mutz & Burrmann, 2014, p172).

## 6. Conclusion and outlook

The question of whether gender distinctions enable a lifeworld-oriented participation that is sensitive to social differences, or if gender stereotypes are manifested and existing social hierarchical structures reproduced, cannot be conclusively answered with mono-educative discussion groups as practical examples. However, it is obvious that, in the context of peer-education projects, gender issues are often discussed from the perspective of girls and young females, as well as in the context of deficiencies, whereas the emphasis in the case of young men and boys centres on the development of identity and conflict-resolution strategies.

Although 'Peacemaker' provides the impression that the emphasis in gender-homogenous group discussions is on male adolescents, the approach does not seem to be oriented to deficits. This statement is based on the fact that 'Peacemaker' primarily does not aim to dichotomize male and female adolescence in offenders or victims and justify gender segregation with it. Even though 'Peacemaker' emphasizes that the difference also lies in the way violence is addressed and the form of violence, this argumentation is not persuasive enough, especially against the background of the above-mentioned conclusion. References have been made in the literature to violent acts being assessed differently, depending on whether they were committed by girls or boys. Violent acts

committed by girls and young female adolescents within school settings, for example, are trivialized or even ignored (Popp, 2003, pp196-204). Furthermore, these violent acts are neither connoted with intimidation nor power, but rather are seen as amusing, ridiculous, outrageous and, above all, are evaluated as contrary to the gender roles of girls and women. Violent acts committed by boys and men, on the other hand, are classified by students and teachers as 'real' violence (Helfferich, 1994, pp171-173; Popp, 2003, p205; Ziehlke, 1993, p109).

The interpretation of male youth violence is characterised by a pronounced functionalistic-theoretical approach, e.g. the construction of masculinity through violence. An increased biographical and conflict-theoretical differentiation in the context of peer education could approach the above-outlined problem area concerning the thematization of hierarchical structures and their breakup in a practical context as well as in research. Only when the biographical self-thematization of violence by female and male adolescence is accorded greater weight can the clear borders of gender distinction blur and commonalities come to the fore. Bereswill (n.d., p31) described these communalities as the defence of the position as a victim and the painful meaning of victims-perpetrators ambiguities in the own biography. According to that, violence is neither innate to girls nor boys, but response strategies which help to deal with these experiences are closely intertwined with the gender gap. This point of view can also support access to the target group because, in this way, girls and female young adults are not perceived from a deficient or polarizing point of view. This also implicitly aims to approach the social practices of differentiation sensitively as a learning goal of the peer-education process, but not to attempt to ascertain the foundational core of those differences. A recommended approach, especially in connection with the prevention of violence, is development and implementation of a gender-sensitive programme, which allows for deconstructing violence as a masculine phenomenon. In future, this will facilitate debate on matters of equality between men and women in the context of questions related to power and structures, and thus allow for identifying positive points of reference (Moser, 2010, p156).

Therefore, it is recommended that social-work practitioners pay attention to the various differences between social groups, but they should also reflect on social and individual assumptions. Concerning violence-prevention programmes for children and young adults, it is recommended that peer-education programmes be offered as well as options for girls and boys to speak about their experiences in homosocial spaces. Furthermore, it is important to teach problem-solving and conflict strategies not only in homosocial spaces and settings but also with boys and girls in heterosocial spaces. Moreover, it is necessary to provide training and reflection sessions for teachers and social workers centred on the topics of their own assumptions of gender stereotypes, violence, and their perceptions of violence committed by boys or by girls, as well as their pictures of gendered identities (such as aggression as part of male identity) and their expectations regarding girls as potential victims and boys as potential perpetrators of violence.

The tension between the reproduction of hierarchical social structures and the sensitivity towards differences is one of the main challenges for social work in the twenty-first century. For the design of twenty-first century social services which must operate amidst the challenges of increasingly individualized and heterogeneous societies and lifestyles, it is therefore crucial to offer targeted and group-specific interventions. But it is highly relevant to be aware of this area of tension, and it is recommended that social workers should constantly reflect on their own individual, social and professional assumptions concerning differences regarding particular social groups (such as young adults, migrant groups, men and women). They should think of differences not in an essentialist but an intersectional manner.

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