

Editorial: Turning Points – Changes in Disadvantaged Life Trajectories

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The various ages of life, particularly childhood and youth, have long been focal points of social work research and practice (Hanses, Homfeldt & Schulze-Krüdener, 2008). Yet only in the last two decades has the importance of transition processes in life trajectories been recognized in social work (see for instance the handbook by Schröer et al., 2013). This new vantage point of transition research covers research both on sociological and psychological life course theories and on anthropological insights into the meaning of “rites de passage” for individuals, communities, and society. Transition processes between different life stages and between different institutions of education, social services, etc. are a challenge for individuals, since social expectations, environments, and reference points are changing dramatically. Therefore, social support (both informal and formal) is considered to be an important feature and starting point for social work. However, one aspect that is not well recognized and researched is the forms of change in life trajectories which are subsumed under the term “turning points” (Gilligan, 2010). This is all the more astonishing since the concept of “turning points” was introduced at the same time as the prevailing notions of trajectories and transitions.

In his well-known study “Children of the Great Depression”, Glen Elder (1974) coined the terms *turning points*, *trajectories*, and *transitions* to explore the life courses of this particular cohort in history. Here, turning points can be defined as “events or transitions that change the net possibility of life course destinations permanently” (Schoon, 2006). Another noteworthy study in this context is the detailed analysis by Emmy Werner of the lives of “The children of Kauai” (Werner & Smith, 1992). The results of this study inspired Werner to develop the concept of *resilience*. Since then, a considerable amount of international research has been carried out with the aim of identifying factors which promote the resilience of young people from disadvantaged family backgrounds. In his review of the literature on resilience, Mike Stein (2008) points out that “being given the chance of a turning point, such as a new opportunity or a break from a high-risk area” is one of the factors often mentioned.

Yet life course research has limited scope when it comes to the question of how people cope with different life events and situations in life, such as growing up in adversity. This is where *biographical research* has the advantage of considering the individual life story from the perspective of the subject and connecting it with the experience of adverse societal circumstances. Biographical research studies focus on downward as well as upward trajectories. Additionally, biographical research is very often used to *analyze informal learning processes* and relies on a very specific concept of how the “subject” is defined. Each subject therefore is seen not only as an actor in his/her social world, but also as an *agent* who is characterized by having the opportunity to act, to reflect on actions, and to change his/her biographical pathway and thereby his/her social environment.

To summarize, in general the concept of turning points can be seen as being encompassed by different theoretical concepts (such as the life course, biography, resilience, attachment, agency, and informal learning processes) and different research traditions. This special issue focuses on the life trajectories of young people who have grown up in disadvantaged life situations and are supported by and confronted with interventions from social service facilities such as youth welfare offices, residential care facilities, juvenile delinquency services, etc. Turning points are considered to be the result of the complex interplay of societal changes affecting the life course of young people, interventions from social services, and biographical practices that enable the young people to cope with these changes in their social environment.

The papers in this *SW & Society* special issue present arguments based on the aforementioned different theoretical concepts, but all focus on the following questions: (a) How do turning points occur in the life trajectories of disadvantaged young people? What factors influence and shape these turning point processes? To what extent do these turning point processes reflect societal opportunities and constraints? (b) How do social work institutions and professionals initiate or influence these turning points? All papers present findings from empirical research using a qualitative approach.

The paper by Daniela Reimer refers to the two concepts of life course and biographical research, discussing their specific possibilities and limits (in general and in a case example) in regard to analyzing turning points. Thomas Gabriel and Samuel Keller use the concepts of turning points and pathways as a methodological approach in order to analyze the genesis of right-wing extremism. They pay particular attention to what they call biographical junctions that are influenced by the primary organizational structures of the family and the immediate social environment, and that play a decisive role in explaining the genesis of racist attitudes and behavioral disposition. Ingrid Höjer's and Yvonne Sjöblom's paper focusses on care leavers and suggest that there are both positive and negative turning points connected to the care experience of young care leavers. They then link this to a resilience perspective which is used to reframe important factors that might support turning points.

The paper by Benjamin Strahl and Theila Rafaeli aims to explore the concept of turning points in regard to care leavers in higher education. Using biographical analysis, they make the point that crucial moments (turning points) in the life of the young people can indeed be analyzed, but for longer-lasting changes to take place these moments have to be embedded in an ongoing biographical learning process. This is why they suggest using turning point processes as the preferable term to better describe the phenomenon. The paper by Carmel Rooney and John Pinkerton – although coming from another theoretical background (attachment, resilience, and humanistic social psychology) – supports the idea of the previous paper by reconstructing changes as not being linked (merely) to specific experiential turning points but rather to a gradual phased shifting of subjectivity.

The final paper in this issue explores the agency perspective on care leavers. Using data from a qualitative study on the housing pathways of young people leaving care, Guy Johnson and Philip Mendes elaborate on five pivotal moments or experiences that encourage young people to actively seize control over their lives and their circumstances.

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