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## Educational potential of critical life events from the point of view of biographical learning

### KEYWORDS

biography, critical life event,  
biographical learning, lifelong  
learning, suffering, education

### ABSTRACT

The article contains deliberations on the subject of adult learning as a result of breaking points in people's lives. It is based on Fritz Schütze and Gerhard Riemann's concept of the trajectory, trying to show the educational potential of critical life events. The paper constitutes an illustration about learning and biography. The analysis concerns an individual who experienced domestic violence, was separated from her family of origin by being placed in a care and educational institution, whose life was additionally complicated by teenage pregnancy and motherhood. The analysis of the narrative makes it possible to see two dimensions of the relationship between learning and biography – learning from the experiences we face during life and biographical learning (or learning from a biography).

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### Introduction

A person's biography consists of a number of various types of events. Some of them are of little importance and do not affect the course of the individual's biography, but there are also those which constitute a kind of boundary between different stages of life or completely change its course. An event that diametrically changes human life is sometimes described by experts in the subject as a turning point in life, biography (e.g. Rokuszewska-Pawelek 2008), a biographical fracture (e.g. Malec 2008), or, as Helena Sęk terms it, a critical event (Sęk 1991). In order for an event to gain critical status, it should distinguish itself in the course of ordinary

events, be connected with values important for the individual experiencing it, be emotionally significant and touch the sphere of functioning that is crucial for a human being (cf. Sęk 2004, Skowrońska-Pućka 2016: 218, Skowrońska-Zbierchowska 2010: 39, Stanisławiak 2012: 7).

In this article, an exemplification of such events will be provided by excerpts from an interview with a former pupil of a socialisation-type educational care institution, focused on the issues of critical life events, which for the narrator was, among others, separation from her family of origin and placement in an educational care institution. The focus will be on their educational potential because, as the experts on the subject indicate, human biographies can be a valuable source of knowledge “about the role of individual events and their functions in the process of education and socialisation. The educational dimension of the experiences contained in the life cycle is [...] the value in which a particular pedagogical significance is perceived. For it is to be a way of knowing how humans, on their individual paths of life, were shaped by factors [...] that [also] influenced their inner world” (quoted after Golonka-Legut 2015: 105).

### **A critical life event – terminological decisions**

There is an entire range of definitions of a crisis or crisis situation that can be identified. Caplan points out that individuals “people are in a state of crisis when they face an obstacle to important life goals – an obstacle that is, for a time, insurmountable by the use of customary methods of problem solving. A period of disorganization ensues, a period of upset, during which many abortive attempts at a solution are made” (James and Gilliland 2004: 9). The crisis, in this perspective, is the result of difficulties in achieving important life goals and the obstacles that appear to people to be insurmountable with the use of customary choices and behaviours (James and Gilliland 2004: 9). According to another author, crises are a kind of personal difficulty or situation that hinders people’s ability to act effectively and thus prevents them from controlling their own lives (Belkin 1984: 424).

It should be remembered that every person is different, just as every crisis is different. The literature on the subject distinguishes four domains of crisis: developmental crises (transformations); situation crises; existential crises; ecosystemic crises (cf. James and Gilliland, 2004: 28, Lipczyński 2007: 19, Stanisławiak 2012: 7). Situational crises are the result of uncommon, surprising, extraordinary events or circumstances that an individual cannot predict or control, and they can lead to a risk to life and health (cf. Stanisławiak 2012: 8). They can occur after such events

as a car accident, job loss, unexpected illness and sudden death. “The key to differentiating a situational crisis from other crises is that a situational crisis is random, sudden, shocking intense, and often catastrophic” (James and Gilliland 2004: 18). Next in the discussion is the existential crisis, which includes “inner conflicts and anxieties that accompany important human issues of purpose, responsibility, independence, freedom, and commitment” (James and Gilliland 2004: 18). This crisis may be the result of a negative or detrimental life balance, etc. “The mid-life crisis (the so-called shadow line) is existential in nature, as well as balance crises appearing in old age, related to the review and summary of one’s past life (Stanisławiak 2012: 8). In turn, development crises (transformations) – “permanent companions of our lives – have a universal character” (Stanisławiak 2012: 7). They belong to the desired, expected events, occurring “in the normal flow of human growth and evolution whereby a dramatic change or shift occurs that produces abnormal responses”. Such a crisis may be a reaction to the birth of a child at a mature age, graduation from university, ending of professional career and retirement (James and Gilliland 2004: 18). Development crises are generally considered to be normal phenomena, but it is worth noting and emphasising that “all persons and all developmental crises are unique and must be assessed and handled in unique ways” (James and Gilliland 2004: 18). What connects all the crises described above is the fact that each of them is connected with change and loss of what was the norm, routine, a constant feature in the life of an individual.

In this text, I would like to focus the reader’s attention on the educational potential of non-normative critical events, and thus on adult learning in situations of life changes. It is worth remembering that, by definition, the occurrence of a critical life event and the experience of an emotional crisis may pose a threat to the affected individual, because “it can overwhelm the individual to the extent that serious pathology, including homicide and murder, may result” (James and Gilliland 2004: 26) but it can also become an important lesson in life.

## **Biographical trajectory and biographical learning**

The concept of biographical trajectory developed by G. Riemann and F. Schütze (1992) is a kind of background for the above-mentioned critical biographical events connected with suffering. According to the authors mentioned, the notion of trajectory includes events, as a result of which the life of an individual ceases to progress in a predictable mode, and everything that was previously known, constant and ordered, changes into a sequence of situations leading to a sense of loss of

control and change. Elżbieta Zakrzewska-Manterys points out that the trajectory refers to chaotic and disordered processes and causes suffering and pain to the individuals who experience it (...)” (Zakrzewska-Manterys 1995: 41). Individual trajectories differ from each other, but as the authors of the above-mentioned concept point out, in each of them, it is possible to distinguish several characteristic elements and indicate a specific sequence. According to the authors, each trajectory runs according to a specific sequence:

- the gradual accumulation of trajectory potential,
- crossing the boundary of activation of the trajectory potential,
- the attempt to achieve and develop a fragile balance in dealing with everyday life,
- destabilisation of the unstable balance and dealing with everyday life,
- the breakdown of the organisation of everyday life and self-orientation,
- attempts to rationalise the trajectory and come to terms with it,
- practical work on the trajectory and gaining control over it and/or freeing oneself from its ties (quoted after Gutowska 2014: 206).

The German sociologist Peter Alheit made a huge contribution to the development of theoretical and empirical verification of the relationship between human biography and learning. The author understood biographical learning as “the self-creative actions of subjects, reflexively organising their experiences in a way that generates a coherent personality, identity, gives meaning to their life history and socially communicable vital perspective of the living world, directing their actions” (quoted after: Tedder, Biesta 2009: 21). The issue of biography, educational biography and biographical learning is the subject of many works by Elżbieta Dubas. From the author’s point of view, biographical learning means “a specific process of learning, carried out by a person who reflects on their biography and recognises and changes themselves and their living world as a result of this reflection. It is based on the life experiences of an individual, it has an emotional, cognitive and social dimension, as well as axiological and existential one. It is purposeful and conducive to the modernisation of identity. It has a practical dimension in that it contributes to a more efficient functioning in a changing and difficult world” (Dubas 2015: 27).

The author of this article perceives the components of the trajectory and biographical learning outlined in this text in the different experiences of the individual, such as the suffering of the pupils of a care and educational institution due to the separation from their family of origin, a teenager having a child, marriage with the consent of the court at the age of sixteen, the course of childhood and adolescence in a problematic family, educational and professional difficulties of

the former pupil of the care and educational institution. Therefore, these concepts served to analyse biographical critical events, the suffering associated with them and to indicate their educational potential.

### **Short description of the person participating in the study<sup>1</sup>**

One of the respondents was Renata, who was 27 years old at the time of the empirical verifications. The woman grew up in a multi-problem family with both parents suffering from alcoholism, physical and psychological violence, unemployment and an extremely difficult financial situation, which led to dependence on the support of aid institutions. The family functioned on the margins of social life, not being able to count on the help of even the closest family. Aid received from the family was only occasional and incidental, and over time it was no longer provided. For some time, the family was characterised by a full structure, later the father was sent to prison, and the mother (several times) stayed in lock down rehabilitation facilities. Renata has two younger brothers, who later, like he, would be sent to various care and educational institutions as a result of the limitation of parental authority of their parents, who were deemed incapable of raising them. The narrative of the woman, who took part in only fragmentary empirical verifications presented here, shows that she always felt responsible for the fate of her siblings and tried to satisfy the needs of the younger brothers by any means. During her childhood and adolescence, she earned money by stealing and then selling stolen goods. Parenting, i.e. caring for her siblings and taking over the tasks of her parents, made it difficult for her to fulfil her schooling obligation. She did not have much difficulty in primary school and managed to complete it. However, she repeated the first grade twice in middle school, but as she emphasises, it was only due to low attendance and later the negative influence of her peer group.

**[Renata]** *The school experiences were both positive and negative. Because on the one hand, at school I had a little rest from things at home, and on the other hand, I was worried about what was going on at home. I didn't think about what I had*

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<sup>1</sup> The fragmentary excerpts of the research presented here were conducted in the years 2013-2015, using a qualitative method of conducting empirical verifications. The biographical method made it possible to learn about a specific life trajectory of girls, former pupils of care and educational institutions, whose common experience was teenage pregnancy and time spent in the institutional foster care system. The technique I used to conduct empirical verifications was the in-depth interview. Thanks to another meeting, which in this case took place 2019, it was possible to draw conclusions which are the subject of this text.

*to write down in class or anything... I was more focused on what was happening at home, but it was fine. I know that the teachers were always fair to me because I was fair to them. And they liked me, so I got along well with them, so I was okay. I had no problems at school. Because in fact, if I went to school normally, I wouldn't have any problems. My problems were related to my absences. [...] And I didn't go because I had to take care of my brothers. Sometimes I wouldn't go because I had to go and make some money.*

At the age of fifteen, the narrator met a boy and after ten months of acquaintance, she got pregnant. When she was placed in a care and educational facility while pregnant, she was assigned an individual learning plan and, as she herself points out, she achieved very high educational results. The woman did not accept her stay in the facility. It was an extremely traumatic experience for her and an unexpected situation, first associated with a huge shock at the news of being placed in the facility, then depression as a result of separation from her siblings and giving birth while still a teenager herself, as well as rebellion and anger due to the prolonged, in her opinion, stay. The woman could not bear to be separated from her siblings and boyfriend, the father of her child and, at the instigation of her social worker, despite the opposition of the institution staff, she began to seek the court's permission to marry at the age of sixteen. The staff, as she pointed out during the interview, did not accept the girl's idea, they took measures to dissuade her from the decision, because her boyfriend – her future husband – abused alcohol and used physical violence against her. Despite the objections of the pedagogical group, she received the court's consent to marry, and after the marriage she left the institution together with her child. After a few months of living in her in-laws' home, problems arose. The marriage, as she says, lasted four years.

**[Renata]** *The truth is, I thought about it earlier, but I didn't have an opportunity to escape. I had no place to go, so, you know, sorry. I lived with my in-laws, in the end, there were such fights... I moved out from Mirek's, because there were eternal fights, because he always beat for any small thing. We have a blue card<sup>2</sup> in place. I even had a case about limiting his parental authority. About domestic violence.*

<sup>2</sup> The Blue Card System is a record-keeping system that is used by law enforcement and social service personnel in domestic violence interventions. It serves to standardise the procedure for police interaction with families experiencing domestic violence. The aims of the system are to identify the existence of alcohol-related and domestic violence problems within a family as well as to collect data, to generate a plan of assistance to affected family members, and to monitor the family situation.

*I don't even know how this case ended, because I didn't get any notification – on any case... nothing. Although the MOPR and the police know where I live now, but Mirek doesn't know...*

The woman now lives with her father and son in a modest, small subsidised social flat in a big city. She maintains regular contact with her brothers. She has good relations with her neighbours and friends. She graduated middle school. Despite the difficulties, she is continuing her education and working. As she assesses herself, her situation is starting to stabilise. She describes her health as very good.

### **Trajectory of institutional upbringing and teenage motherhood**

1. The collapse of expectations – an independent attempt to maintain the family status quo, by taking over the tasks of parents and satisfying the needs of younger siblings, failed. As a result of the court's interference in the sphere of parental authority, a forced separation from parents and siblings, unexpected for the narrator, took place, and the woman was placed in a care and educational institution, which caused her enormous suffering, pain and severe stress. As a result of mutually conditional events, the hope of remaining in her family home was abandoned.
2. Subordination to external forces – the woman, trying to act as a parent to her siblings for many years (taking her brothers to school and picking them up, helping with lessons, satisfying the nutritional needs of her brothers, earning a living), started to lose control over her own position in life. She closed herself off to her own needs, which made it difficult for her to fulfil her schooling obligation and became a direct reason for being placed in a care and educational institution. The lack of security, acceptance and love made her satisfy these needs outside the home.
3. Confrontation with something unknown and inevitable – in the woman's opinion, this was her placement in the institutional foster care system and separation from her siblings and her boyfriend, the father of her unborn child. The narrator's attention was focused on activities aimed at helping her to leave the facility as soon as possible. At the same time, her child was born. Thus, one can speak of a co-existence of strongly debilitating, non-normative critical events. On the one hand, the woman intensified efforts that favoured her leaving the institution, and on the other hand, she was completely closed off to the help offered by the staff of the facility and by her peers, the other pupils. Without paying attention to the possible consequences postponed in time, she once again disregarded her own needs and failed to see the benefits of staying in the care and educational institution.

These included, for example, safe shelter, having all her needs and those of her child met, pedagogical and psychological support, and the possibility of continuing her education, while at the same time providing professional pedagogical and medical care for her newborn child.

4. Individual disorientation – resulting in the mental isolation from the institution's educators, peers in the institution and schoolmates. The woman spent time in her room, depreciated the other children and the legitimacy of staying in the facility, did not notice the concern of pedagogues, her social worker, educators and other employees of the facility in which she was staying.
5. Biographical caretakers – one of them was undoubtedly the grandmother whom the narrator often mentioned during the conversation. The grandmother appeared as a caring and concerned person, interested in the fate of her three grandchildren, although due to her advanced age and difficult financial situation, she was not able to protect the narrator and her brothers from being placed in the institutionalised foster care system.
6. The cumulative process of disorder build-up – this process began the moment the study participant left the care and educational institution. This event, which has great consequences to this day, cut her off from the institutional, formal assistance which she could have received as a minor if she had stayed in the institution. In addition, it resulted in dependence on her violent, alcoholic husband and his family, which intensified and destabilised the already difficult living situation of the narrator. At the same time, it is worth noting that this was also a breakthrough moment, as a result of which the narrator decided to take action to change her situation – she left her husband, obtained a subsidised social flat, which she shares with the grandfather of the child, and thus can continue her education and take up employment.

At present, it should be pointed out that the situation, although according to the woman stabilised, is threatened with the possibility of launching a new trajectory, which may be influenced by narrator's father's alcoholism.

### **Educational potential of critical life events. Biographical perspective**

According to G. Riemann and F. Schütz, the authors of the already mentioned concept of the biographical trajectory, there are three ways to change a situation linked with suffering. They point to “escape, systematic familiarisation with the



trajectory of suffering and inclusion of the trajectory into life experience as a developmental biographical component” (quoted after Gutowska 2014: 209). In my opinion, in the case of the woman participating in the fragmentary empirical verifications presented here, one can talk about the inclusion of the trajectory into life experience in the case of the event that was her adolescence in a family with parental ineptitude and escape in the context of her stay in the care and educational institution. It is not only about her eagerness to leave quickly, but also the fact that she closed herself off what it offered and was unable to take advantage of her stay as pro-development potential and failed to notice its potential even in retrospect. A long-term stay in the institution could have contributed to stabilising the social and educational situation of the young woman and her child, as well as to restoring and maintaining internal homeostasis, which the woman does not see to this day. It can be said that during her stay in the institution, the narrator was characterised (in hindsight) by non-adaptive ways of functioning, which resulted in a significant worsening of the already difficult situation of both her and her newborn child.

**[Renata]** *The facility... frankly, no offence, was there any support or help? I didn't feel any help at all... it was a place for... waiting until my parents stopped drinking, wasn't it? A waiting room. I didn't want my baby to grow up there. I wanted something better for him.*

In the case of the adult, mature woman, the birth of a child can be interpreted through the prism of a developmental crisis. This event in her life should then be regarded as a natural next stage, which increases the chance for a positive solution to the crisis, which becomes a bridge between successive stages of development. It is worth stressing, however, that the birth of a child while a teenager may contribute to the occurrence of a situational crisis – unexpected and not developmental. This is the case if the event occurs at an inappropriate time and is accompanied by unfavourable circumstances, as it was undoubtedly the case here. This is because we are dealing with the extremely difficult situation of the girl's family of origin, her placement in an institution, etc. However, it was the teenage pregnancy and motherhood, which should be treated as a socially unpunctual and emotionally critical life event, that in hindsight became a contribution to deeper reflection and motivation, which resulted in taking measures aimed at improving her situation.

**[Renata]** *If I hadn't been pregnant, I wouldn't have married him. This wedding was only for my child to be brought up in better conditions than I had, because let's be honest with ourselves, an institution is not a good place for a child, right?*

*I chose, so to speak, the lesser of two evils. If that's what you can call it... Sometimes you have to take such steps. I preferred my child to grow up in a home, normally, to have his own space, to have peace... I suspect that if it weren't for the child, I wouldn't have finished school, or I would only be doing middle school now. [...] Maybe it was a good thing that it worked out this way, because the lifestyle I led before my pregnancy, I suspect I would end up in a bad way... And here it saved me a little bit.*

It is also worth noting that the difficulties of her own childhood and the necessity of fulfilling a parental role to her younger brothers were conducive to and facilitated the narrator's functioning in the role of a teenage mother, and thus another example of the educational potential of critical life events.

**[Renata]** *This may sound a little weird, but... I somehow do not feel anything, there's no joy or sadness, or anything like that (upon learning about her pregnancy – A.S.P.). I approached it more – well, it's hard, if it's gonna happen, it's gonna happen, it's done, now I have to deal with it, raise the kid. [...] I didn't have to imagine anything, because the truth is that you can say I raised two children before my son, right? So I didn't really imagine anything, but I was shocked more by the fact that I felt so peaceful. [...] My son was a very good baby. I don't remember him crying very much. He didn't cry. If he wanted something, I would come, take him in my arms, feed him, massage his tummy, and he would go to sleep. In fact, there was no great tragedy there. What annoyed me the most was that my mother-in-law didn't realise that I already knew my way around children, and she tried to [obscene word redacted – A. S.-P.] into everything. It was so annoying!*

What is significant and worth stressing, in the context of the presented text, which I tried to illustrate with selected fragments of the statements of the woman participating in the study, the experience of a crisis may become a kind of opportunity because the inherent suffering and pain force the individual to reflect on the situation in which they have found themselves, to (re)interpret it, to seek support and assistance, and to try new ways of acting and coping (Şek, 2004: 51), and thus enrich their biography. In this understanding, both critical biographical experiences, as well as consideration and deeper reflection on them can have a huge educational potential, and the interpretation and reinterpretation of the course of life is a learning space (cf. Golonka-Legut 2015:115). As Joanna Golonka-Legut points out, “[...] individual life experiences can be perceived as a source of the learning process, but also as a resource (means) of educational activity (learning)” (Golonka 2012: 45-62).

## **Summary – two dimensions of the learning–biography relationship**

The analysis of the narrative allows us to see two dimensions of the relationship between learning and biography. The first is learning from the experiences we deal with during the course of life. The second, which Elżbieta Dubas points out, is biographical learning (or learning from biography). As the author points out, “learning from experience” is learning in the course of life, which often has a random and incidental character, but is also implemented in a planned and purposeful way. “It is learning from experience directly, i.e. in the course of events, in direct spatio-temporal contact with the Self and the Other. Learning from experience is learning in (co)presence, (co)participation and (co)action: in events, in life situations, through contact and interaction in the same time and space, through meetings, conversations, dialogues, observations, actions. It is learning in relationships in which experiences arise” (Dubas 2011: 7). In the case of the woman participating in the study, it took place while carrying out parental duties towards her younger siblings and made it easier to find her place and to cope with the difficult role of a teenage mother. In turn, the second meeting with the author of this text became an opportunity to learn from her biography, which means “learning from one’s own experiences, contained in one’s own autobiographical memory, as a result of reflection on one’s own biography (autobiography). It can take place in a biographical interview situation as well as in educational and therapeutic classes [...]” (Dubas 2011: 7). This type of reflection can be exemplified by the narrator’s statement about the marriage which, as she stated afterwards, she entered into too early, which contributed to disturbing the homeostasis of the narrator and her child. The conversation became an opportunity for deeper reflection (not only recollecting and extracting events from memory). The narrator explained and evaluated her own experiences, searched for their meaning and tried to understand them.

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