THE PROCESS OF OVERCOMING TRAUMATIC EXPERIENCES IN THE NARRATIVE OF AN OLDER PERSON SUBJECT TO DOMESTIC VIOLENCE: CASE STUDY

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Abstract

The paper focuses on the problem of elder abuse which has become a global problem. World-wide research indicate that during the last year almost 16% of people aged 60 and more were victims to at least one of the forms of abuse (Yon, Mikton, Gassoumis, & Wilber, 2017). Violence against older people is one of the social problems that are hard to diagnose. This is mainly due to a conspiracy of silence and a wall of shame, that the victims experience. Breaking these barriers is crucial for the thorough diagnosis to be performed. This type of violence usually happens at home, behind the closed door, and information about it reach the public when there is a tragedy. Only some of the victims decide to talk about their, very often difficult, experiences. The paper presents the case of an older woman who experienced a long-term domestic violence. The analysis of the mechanisms of the developing suffering and its impact on the identity of people who suffer was based on the concept of trajectory created by the German sociologist – Fritz Schütze. In this sense, trajectory is a type of a biographical process during which the events are unpredictable and sometimes narrators lose all the control over them.

The goal is to show individual trajectory revealing the biographical struggle with trauma for decades of adult life. Method: A case study with autobiographical-narrative interview was implemented. The characteristic feature of the analyzed narrative was that the trajectory processes of suffering have left the interviewed senior with the feeling she is completely dependent on the merciless fate on which she have no influence and which she cannot change.

Results: Living in violent relationships, the woman lived with the lowered self-esteem. Long-term, brutal violence evoked very strong, extreme emotions in the narrator, accompanied by suffering, fear and a sense of powerlessness. The analyses show the example of overcoming barriers and a heroic inner fight in the process of dealing with the traumatic life experiences.

Keywords: elder abuse, domestic violence, violence against women, trajectory of violence

1 INTRODUCTION

Violence against older people is one of the social problems that are very hard to diagnose. This is mainly due to a conspiracy of silence and a wall of shame surrounding the victims. Breaking these barriers is crucial to enable a thorough diagnosis of the phenomenon. This type of violence usually happens at home, behind the closed door, and information about it reach the public when there is a tragedy. Only some of the victims decide to talk about their, very often difficult, experiences and to look for help. Elder abuse is not a marginal phenomenon. World-wide research indicate that during the last year almost 16% of people aged 60 and more fell victims to at least one of the forms of abuse (Yon, Mikton, Gassoumis, & Wilber, 2017). Violence
undermines the fundamental human rights which lay the basis for the development of the modern civilization of peace. These rights are guaranteed and protected by numerous legal regulations, the Convention of Human Rights being one of the most important. Unfortunately, these declarations often remain just a theory. According to the report by the World Health Organization (2001), every year at least 4 million seniors in Europe fell victims to physical abuse, 29 million experience psychological violence and 2.5 thousand die in result of violence. The most vulnerable are people with disabilities, Alzheimer, dementia and seniors from poor families. Victims of violence often experience many forms and types of abuse they are not able to stop due to their age and physical and mental condition.

There is a great threat that elder abuse will increase due to the ageing of the society. The demographic forecasts indicate that by 2050, 20% of the world population will be 60 or more (60+) years old. Since 1950, the 60+ population is constantly growing and it is estimated to double globally by 2050 (United Nations, 2013). The ageing of the society is a constant process and will increase due to the ever longer lifespan and the low rate of natural increase. In this situation, protection of the human rights, in particular protection of seniors against violence, becomes a global, world-wide educational and social challenge.

1.1 Analysis of Fritz Schütze’s trajectory in biographical experiences

The analysis of the mechanisms of the developing suffering and its impact on the identity of people who suffer was based on the concept of trajectory created by the German sociologist – Fritz Schütze (1997). In this sense, trajectory is a type of a biographical process during which the events are unpredictable and sometimes narrators completely loose the control over them. As noticed by M. Nowak-Dziemianowicz (2006, p.230), the trajectory of suffering refers to those moments in life “when suffering comes suddenly and unanticipated”. The trajectory is significant in the biographical sense, as it allows to see suffering as a “phenomenon” which changes the course of individual’s life and his or her relationships with the loved ones, significant others and oneself (Schütze, Riemann 1992).

The characteristic feature of the analyzed narrative was that the trajectory processes of suffering have left the interviewed senior with the feeling she is completely dependent on the merciless fate on which she have no influence and which she cannot change. The trajectory processes of suffering bring the sense of merciless fate into the lives of sufferers; they force them to see themselves as being controlled by strange, outer forces on which they basically have no influence. These processes modify the present life situation, reformulate expectations towards the future and force reinterpretation of the life course (Schütze, Riemann 1992).

According to F. Schütze (1997), the sequential organization of the trajectory is the following:

1) Accumulation of the trajectory potential
2) Crossing the line between intentional and conditional mental state (and between intentional and conditional actions)
3) Attempts to gain new, fragile balance in dealing with everyday life
4) Destabilizing the unstable balance of everyday life (“falling into the whirlpool”) 
5) Breakdown of organization of the daily life and orientation towards self
6) Efforts to process the trajectory theoretically — attempts to rationalize and accept it
7) Practical efforts to deal with trajectory and to gain control over it and/or break free from it.

The trajectory process does not always involve all the seven stages. Sometimes some steps of the suffering trajectory are skipped, which is actually in line with the Schütze’s theory that that the course of the trajectory does not have to be sequential.

2 METHODOLOGY

We used the biographical research as referring to certain individuals whose life story is meaningful enough to reveal something important about the narrators and the world they live or used to live in. “This may be an overall of individual experiences, the course of the whole life of the certain person... It may be only some area of human activity, for example professional or family life (...) It may also involve the key moments in life connected with some historical events like changing roles and social status” (Nowak, 1998, p.100). A case study with an autobiographical-narrative interview was conducted. Narrative interviews may refer to a certain event which is important for the respondent or they can also cover the story of the narrator’s life as seen from his or her own perspective (Kvale2007; Chase2005).
The research question was the following:
What is the course of the trajectory processes in the biographical experiences of an older person subject to a long-term domestic violence?

The paper presents the case of Anna, which is the part of a wider research (Mackowicz, 2017). The Author’s intent was to have narratives as free as possible, therefore the interviewed senior was asked to share her story regarding the abuse she had experienced. In the cited statements, the dominant were her experiences of the great pain, suffering and trauma, which were present in her life for decades.

The narrative was compared to the concept of trajectory processes by Fritz Schütze (1997). His sequential organization of the trajectory was used as the analytical tool.

3 RESULTS

Trajectory in the biographical experiences of a senior — the case of Anna

Anna, 62 years old (educational background: secondary, arts) was abused by her husband (higher education) and many years later, also by her son and daughter-in-law.

Anna’s narrative includes many traumatic memories of her experiences of domestic violence, especially from her husband, and later also her younger son and his wife. During the interview, recalling the moments of suffering brought back many painful memories and evoked very strong emotions.

Initially, Anna told about her youth which was a very happy period in her life. She remembers her family, very good relationship with their parents, father in particular.

3.1. Accumulation of the trajectory potential.

Quite soon Anna began to recognize events that led to the accumulation of the trajectory potential in the near future. Her husband began to use violence soon after they got married but at first, Anna believed his aggressive behavior will pass. Her in-laws supported this belief and excused their son’s behavior as immature. So initially, the narrator accepted her husband’s aggression and kept it secret.

In her narrative, Anna recalls one particular incident when her husband, after she gave birth to their child, said while sitting by the baby’s crib:

“... he’s so tiny... if I grabbed his head, I would crush it with one hand”.

This is the first time Anna tells about this and she emphasizes:

“This may seem insignificant incident in the light of what happened later but for all those years it was something deep inside me, something I could never forget.”

The husband began to isolate Anna from the world, he did not let her have a job or see her friends. She felt alone and helpless, and her life became gradually disorganized.

“... I was 24, with a baby and no one around. My husband got rid of all my friends.”

“My world was closed within the four walls.”

“... I couldn’t shake it off and there was no one around to tell me: Hey, girl!”

3.2. Crossing the line

The problem of violence in Anna’s life was getting more and more serious, the trajectory potential increased and after several incidents the line was crossed.

The narrator recalls many examples of cruel, brutal abuse: physical, psychological, sexual and economical. At this stage of the narrator's life the dominant emotions were great fear, anxiety, uncertainty, insecurity, alienation and loneliness.

“I was constantly under such a pressure from others... I had never had close relationships with the neighbors anyway, complete isolation.”

“I run out on the street, barefoot, and I am standing there, huge snow banks, and I’m standing there, on that street in the middle of the night thinking: where am I going to go?”

“Why did I stay... because I had no chance to get out of it, I had no family.”
Her husband who created the impression of a happy family only reinforced her isolation and claming up.

“And that was my slavery! Because nobody believed me and in the end he tried to make me look like a psycho... how could I explain this to people... to anyone, when he threw us out of the house in the night and went to his mother, he said “she just went nuts”, and until the kids were small enough that no one listened to them or someone else said something, he was saying: Well, she must have provoked him with something.”

“What could I do back then, everyone was looking at me like I was an idiot, and my husband was creating this scenography and we were just pawns in his play.”

In Anna’s narrative, we can sense resentment at people around her (from church environment) as they did not react to what was happening.

“When I mentioned my broken jaw, this sister took me to the hospital, we took a taxi and she knew about it.”

“This sister told me then to offer my suffering for other people.”

She also emphasizes that she did not received proper support neither from the assistance center nor the police.

“Then (at the first time) nobody helped me, no one! So when someone asks me why I stayed, I don’t even bother to answer everyone because it there is no point. So what that they has arrested him for 24 hours, if he got out like an enraged bull and I was trembling.”

3.3. Attempts to achieve the balance

Despite isolation, uncertainty and fear, Anna tried to reach a new balance in dealing with her daily life. In her narrative, she reveals different strategies of dealing with the trajectory; strategies which helped her to face the suffering and difficult events.

Some of them involves resorting to other activities, some were meant to foresee the potential danger.

“... to endure all this... books helped me, I’m a ‘bookworm’... when I couldn’t stand it anymore... because my husband got so openly aggressive, because it leaves marks... he was destroying me psychically, he bullied me in different ways, he mastered it. So when I couldn’t stand it anymore, I went upstairs and under the sofa to this bedclothes compartment, I hid there and wanted to disappear.. I could read several dozen pages like that... until that moment came when I began to understand what I was reading, I came back to that place and read on, and this helped me get back to myself, I had to... read it over.”

“...with all this, I tried to be a good mom, lady of the house and wife. I did my best so tit would impact the children as little as possible.”

“My husband was going out and this was a signal we need to run.”

3.4. “Falling into the whirlpool”

During the next stage, we can see how Anna “falls into the whirlpool” as she focuses on sustaining the fragile balance of the new life situation.

“I always made everything ready for the supper, here in the kitchen, on the cutting board, cheese and cold meat, so he would have nothing to complain about, he would have everything... even the tea was sweetened, he just had to pour the hot water... but he wanted potatoes that’s why he dragged me down the stairs.”

“And I did everything just not to give him any reason to attack.”

“I thought I would wash quickly and run away to the bedroom and maybe he will find something else to do, switch on the TV or go for a I walk and sober a bit but I wasn’t fast enough.”

Crossing the trajectory potential in the narrative can be seen also in Anna’s attempts to escape and in the attempt to commit a suicide.

“There were moments I couldn’t bear it any longer and I run away and kept running.”

“I had those periods of running away, I also wanted to jump under the truck and I would have done it but I thought about that poor man in the car, that he would have to live with it. This stopped me.”

“I felt like I was lifted up and I touched the ceiling, I was holding the knife and I cut my wrists.”
3.5. The breakdown of organization of the daily life and orientation towards self

Another stage in Anna’s narrative is the breakdown of organization of the daily life and orientation towards self. She feels helpless, distanced and indifferent towards her circumstances.

“... I turned into a stone... my husband was satisfied when I cried because it is so hard to carry all this, but I haven't been able to cry for years, I can’t.”

Then, some reflections and questions about her personal experiences begin to appear in Anna’s narrative. She admits that thanks to therapy she it is easier to deal with her experiences.

“I deny many things... now many things open, I can see this whole situation better, I go to therapy.”

3.6. Efforts to rationalize and accept the trajectory

The narrator reflects upon, rationalizes and makes effort to process the trajectory theoretically. She realizes the importance of the values she believes in.

“I cannot accuse myself like that, I was a completely enslaved person! I used my whole energy to not give him the pretext to be aggressive, to spare our children from seeing this.”

“Now, I can see how brainwashed I was... I had to find something to survive... all for the family. For me, this sacramental bond, this vow is fundamental.”

“This sister was challenging my idealism, these principles I honored, my faith.”

Anna becomes more and more convinced that during those difficult years she lived in tune with herself and according to her values.

“I also tried to keep my dignity and after all my husband did to me, the world my judge me but I kept my dignity.”

“My husband mocked me for so many years, at some point I slipped out, I tried, I was not passive.”

She appreciates the help of different services but first of all, she emphasizes the great support from her older son.

“Now I see that there is social service, psychological help, crisis intervention... I appreciate the help but if it wasn’t my older son, I would die of hunger and cold (I’m not exaggerating) because 105 PLN for food is humiliating, perhaps these services do not have the funds as well.”

3.7. Practical work on the trajectory

Anna made an attempt to break out of the trajectory of suffering. Her narrative shows the extreme work she has done even though she is convinced she has not freed herself completely yet.

“You know... but I don’t have peace, there is the physical peace, I know I don’t have to be alert, tense and react to assaults... so that he has no excuse to react physically or verbally, or anyway, I am free from that... and I have time to work through the different things with the therapist, it helps me, but I’ve discovered a terrible mechanism... it was a manufacture of destruction! And it was so malicious.”

Clearly, a new trajectory appears that refers to the narrator’s younger son. Anna reflects a lot, trying to understand and discuss with herself the motivations of her son, which give her a lot of new suffering and pain. Anna realizes her younger son, as the victim of abuse, has also become a person who took over the abusive patterns and shows them in the relationship with the narrator. Anna finds it hard to accept that she lost the contact with her son and granddaughter and that during the court hearing her son denied there was a long-term violence in their family, he lied and took the side of his father.

“I go to the therapy, but you know what hurts me the most... what happened with the younger son because he is also the victim and, you know, I defended him in court because he lied and he lied poorly... he said there was never any violence in our home.”

“... I can’t get over it... I don’t get to see my granddaughter now.”

“... I don’t know if there is anyone in the world who could tell me something wise how to solve this situation... with my younger son. Not to complicate their life but to protect them from great evil.”

Anna needs to find new reserves of strength in herself to work through this trajectory and free from it. Only then, she will be ready to face new challenges and “cut off the dark past”.
4 DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

The presented analysis covers the autobiographical-narrative interview conducted with a 60-year-old woman who was abused by her husband for several dozen years. The analysis of the narrative, based on Fritz Schütze’s concept of the biographical research, shows the course of the trajectory processes in the respondents’ life. In her narrative, the woman revealed the great pain and high saturation with the negative emotions. She recalled, with great detail, her experiences as the victim of physical, psychological, sexual and economical abuse. For the respondent, this long-term traumatic experience of violence was reinforced by the social isolation, withdrawal from the social life and lack of reaction from other people despite the signals she needed help.

The influence of the trajectory processes on the identity leads individuals to practical work on the trajectory and gaining control over it. The transformation of the individual’s relationship to self takes place during the biographical work (Schütze, Riemann, 1992). The support of the significant others and professional help is of huge importance.

The presented individual trajectory of the older woman reveals her biographical struggle with trauma during 40 years of her adult life. Living in the violent relationship, the woman lived for years with the lowered self-esteem. Long-term, brutal violence evoked very strong, extreme emotions in the narrator, accompanied by suffering, fear and a sense of powerlessness. Even though she has not processed the trauma enough to gain control over it, the analysis shows us the example of overcoming barriers and the heroic inner fight in the process of dealing with the traumatic life experiences.

REFERENCE LIST


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