Understanding relations: contexts and meanings of psychological work in Residential Child Care Institutions.

Andrea Zanghì¹, Gioacchino Mazzola¹, Ivana Maniscalchi¹, Giuseppa Giangrande², Serena Giunta³

Abstract
This article aims at taking a look at the psychologist’s role in juvenile community centres. There are different kinds of Residential Child Care Centres and one constant - as to them - is represented by the psychologist, an important and significant figure in all of the centres aiming at taking in minors, at understanding their needs and at identifying and spotting their skills. Every day, each meeting is given up to the laborious construction of a sense of sharing, that shouldn’t neglect or overlook and demean the minor, that shouldn’t make even the peculiar importance of the community centre, that shouldn’t standardize all the good practices that make diversity a richness.

This is the programmatic aim of each juvenile reception center, but, in everyday’s routines, we have to take account of situations like “chaos”, “suffering”, “exhaustion”, “bother”, “aggressiveness”, equally experienced by all the ones who are involved in the centre’s life.

These conflicts, in a group context, have to be identified, to be made clear, to be provided of significance. As stated by Jaques (1989), only through the engagement of all the members in an analysis of the implicit rules that are related to the work structure/organization, it’s possible to activate a development process (working through) of the worries and anxiety tinged with the functions and the objectives of the belonging social institution. Burnout, related to an individual or a work group, represents in this case a symptom that can’t be attributable to any individual or group psychopathology, but it’s a valuable and unequivocal sign of the fact that the centre is “ill” (Giunta et al., 2010).

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¹ Giudice Onorario Minorile, Tribunale di Palermo
² Docente I.C. “A. Veneziano – P. Novelli”
³ Docente LUMSA, Santa Silvia, Palermo
Residential Child Care Institution
work with and for the minor

“To identify” and “to make sense” are prerogative actions of each of the professional figures involved in a community centre’s life, but, at the end, they are the psychologists’ main task (Salvatore, Venuleo, 2008; De Luca Picione, Valsiner, 2017), as to their education and status, as they live, though in part, the community centre life, but they are also the main task of anyone who can “distance himself/herself” in order to be able to “observe”; this is, anyway, an observation that is never external and impartial or objective. A psychologist is part of the observed system, he/she influences it just through his/her presence and can’t be aware of all the effects caused by his/her presence (Von Foerster, 1987).

In and with the constant awareness of the fact that “any event in a group involves somehow all the participators and alters the perceptive vision or field, by setting off other complex changes” (Di Maria, Lo Verso, 1995), the team time becomes, too, a “mental place” where it is especially thinkable for all the participators that they experience the residential centre in all of its multiple levels and standards, included therefore the institutional and political ones (Giunta et al., 2010).

The search for the meaning of what happens and comes about begins with the attempt by the psychologist to have clear what are the levels involved: from the ones defined and determined by Bronfenbrenner (microsystem, mesosystem, esosystem and macrosystem) (Bronfenbrenner, 1986), pursuing then with the intraindividual levels, like for example, the “Self” levels proposed by Berne (Adult Self, Parent Self, Child Self) (Berne, 2000) or, more, making a reference to other systemic value levels, like the ones proposed in the Coordinated Management of the Meanings Theory (Cronen, Johnson e Lannamann, 1983); according to it the construction of meanings occurs within a ranking of significant contexts (content, linguistic act/action, episode/event, relation between communicating subjects, inner biography, cultural patterns), where the highest level confers importance to the lowest one, but in a biunivocal function that, at any time, allows to something that isn’t important, to a detail, to an apparently insignificant action, to revolutionaryize a hierarchy (Salvatore, Valsiner, 2014; Valsiner, 2005).

This “complexity”, in which each mind is “immersed”, is often “managed“ by each person through the “automatic/involuntary method “(Le Doux, 1995): many of the choices of a human being take place unconsciously. Without this healthy carelessness we would get lost in many considerations about the way we should proceed, without preconceptions we would stop, each time, and consider the events as if they were new and this, in our speed daily routine, isn’t useful.

However, we know what can happen with the “automatism”: an automatic pilot leads us to destination allowing to close our eyes, we can’t even look at the way. But how many things get lost by not looking at the way? What happens if we lose experience as to the use of gearshift and pedals? What accidents can happen if the automatic pilot is programmed for the usual way, while this one- because of something- has changed?

So, it could be interesting to try to investigate some implicits, and talk about the moments when in a community center this investigation activity is more intense and becomes a priority.

The social worker, the community centre supervisor, the tutors, the psychologist participate in the team meetings in the centre; the psychologist tries to simplify what is defined as “a meeting between implicits “, allowing, for example, to explain the challenging and aggressive behaviour of a child (with his/her need to strain the resistance of the adult who is taking care of him/her, to act out possible imitative behaviours of the affection figures, to react to his/her inadequacy and inferiority feeling by taking on a strong position), as to the workers ‘ reactions ( by highlighting the emotional experience, the intolerable and denied
thoughts, all of those previous experiences that lead and/or could lead, automatically, an adult response.

The reception of a minor and the support to his/her development goes through an important moment: the one of the “work” with the minors’ families. It is necessary to point out that from the perspective of the “institutional mandate”, it isn’t the centre staff that take responsibility for the family of the minors living in the reception centre. But it’s evident that the constant contact with this group of adults, real and concrete when they come and visit the minors (if there isn’t any interdiction by the competent court) represents an occasion to meet all the range of habits, needs, expectations and experiences of these families, it’s fundamental the dialogue with them.

“Building” a good relation with the family of the minor is very important for a positive outcome of a planning activity; however, it’s obvious that it’s difficult to reach a good mutual understanding with adults who have plenty of reasons to show themselves unwilling. These relations, very often, begin and develop on the basis of a natural, double register that, in these contexts, reaches the paroxysm and is bursting: as stated by Erving Goffman in his dramaturgy pattern of social interaction (1959), each of us when dealing with others, “lets settle in in the own living room” that is in the entertainment room, so that we can show our best aspect (Moore, Jasper, Gillespie, 2011). In the same way, in the best case scenario, the minors’ families deal with the centre workers (or only with some of them), “by wearing their Sunday best”. Sometimes, this doesn’t even happen, but we won’t dwell on these situations in this article.

So, the meeting with the minors’ families in the centre begins and develops on the basis of this game, easy to be understood, but not so easy and simple to be managed. Once more, in fact, the psychologist has to regard many levels: the relation family- psychologist, the relation family- educators, the relation family- minors. But remarks have to be done as to all of the triads that can be composed alternately in a daily setting: psychologist-educationalist(trainer)- family, family-minor- psychologist, educationalist-minor-family, etc. Each configuration represents a context of actions that, inevitably, produces meanings and, consequently, messages for each other diad or triad; concretely, a “confrontation” between the minors’ parents and the psychologist related to, for example, an event that involved an educationalist in which effectively (and with the awareness of the “living room game” of Goffman) it’s tried to treat a meaning for the event, should take account of the manipulative sizes of each participant in the interaction( firstly, psychologist and family) and of the effects on the one who is present at the interaction or becomes aware of it(educationalists and minors).

The attention paid to these procedures represents only the management of the “pragmatic effects” of communication. The other level, crucial and closer to the meaning of an implicit that we want to speak about here is linked to, once again, the remark about meanings.

As to Goffman, attention should be given to the other rooms (with their mess, filth, organization, richness/wealth) and to anything that every person has chosen to show in his/her living room, too; it’s always a room that needs to be furnished, that should be clean and that, therefore, gives information about what anyone thinks or means to be the “entertainment room”.

The position of a psychologist could be the one of accepting a collaboration attempt or a collaboration simulation as the capacity to put the habits in the centre above his/her own demands. If we take into account that the culture of many families is different from the centre rules, even only the attempt of simulating an adjustment involves something that is very important and, in our opinion, this attempt is very respectworthy. But it isn’t sure that the other “partners “get the reception by the psychologist as an evidence of respect, on the contrary, it happens that, in this attempt, families think that they can manage the relationship. This is a crucial point: it
represents the moment when the psychologist is allowed to peek in other rooms. So inappropriate requests come, less friendly tones come to light, the actions in the center and/or the behaviour of the own children are criticized more and more frankly. Every criticism or disapproval, every menace, every “received insult”, tells us in a significant way the world of a family and the relation with the authority: in the best case scenario a complaint can be an event that allows to access memories, similar events belonging to the past, in which the family members faced critical phases, were in difficulties, felt emotions. Always in the best case scenario a patient listening, respect and appreciation for every effort to support the centre rules allow to create a bond of confidence that, sometimes, gives the psychologist the opportunity to “intercept” all the stories about the parenting of these families: “the child I was, the models I carried out, what kind of parent I became, how I played this role together with my partner…”. It’s essential not to misunderstand it. It isn’t described the attempt to build a psychotherapeutic way: it’s always several “bursts/flashes”, short moments (visiting hours when the psychologist is present at the end of these hours or a phone call between psychologist and family that takes place on request by an operator). So, the community centre tries to “open” spaces, but hardly builds a frequency, a rate, that are necessary to structure a fully entitled responsibility. As it was said before, it’s about taking advantage of these moments, when the effort or difficulty consists of enlarging what is useful, by trying to let apart resentment, criticisms and manipulations or conditionings. All of these exist, annoy, irritate, but they can become a “bottom noise”. The “Moiré” effect allows to affirm that, as an “encounter” between two sounds with a different frequency will produce a “beat”, a “third sound”, in the same way in a meeting between us and our conversation partner there will be resonance and there will be a “beat”: it means that we get the opportunity to create a “new frequency”, a cycle, in which the shifts (the mutual heaviness) represent a setting, while the resonance is what we want to let appear. They are, as stated before, moments, intense moments in which, sometimes, it’s possible to say even only a word that could have some effects on reports full of denial, minimizing, extreme rejection as to the possible abuse and damage caused to the own children. What we write could even sound pretentious, as it suggests the idea that a moment can produce a change that is often difficult to be achieved during long periods by the Services responsible for working with families, so it’s always useful to specify.

The position of the ones who work in a community center in relation to the families of the minors living in the centre is a position of major tertiary. Even if there’s a judgement by the operators, the principal objective isn’t the one to give evidence of the importance of the adults’ parenting: the family perceives this difference in proportion to the relationship with other colleagues working for other Services and that allows people to be less on the defensive. Sometimes the “space” of confrontation with the people working in the centre and, above all, with the psychologists, is felt by families as a border area, it’s something half-way between a stage, where they can play the role of the good parent or the of the upset parent or, moreover, the one of the persecuted parent, and a confessional, where he/she can tell what he/she is afraid of, where he/she can complain about what is wrong, in his/her opinion, in the centre, where he/she can even get angry or rant.

Here appears the well-known “opportunity window”, the glimmer, the moment in which the parent is enlightened by twilight: it isn’t the daylight anymore, but it hasn’t come the night yet.

The Mask of the actor is on his face, but it isn’t fully tight or relevant, so it’s possible to catch sight of his mouth and of his clenched teeth: it’s the moment in which it’s possible to make use of the Moiré effect. All the emotions and thoughts that are available to an adult, together with the “things” that a psychologist puts (always as to emotions and thoughts) allow to let appear a third thought, a third
emotion. It rarely happens that denied thoughts and emotions, too painful, too unpleasant appear and can be at disposal of consciousness. The time necessary in order to think over the appeared emotion, the new idea (“maybe I was wrong”) is limited; the closure is sudden, the Freudian game of repression is quick. Then the task consists in marking the moment, that is in agreeing that a doubt existed, even for a moment. This sign is what we try to offer to the Services colleagues who deal with evaluating and reconstructing the competences of a family, that, always in the best case scenario, is engaged in a reconstruction project as to balances and virtues, essential in order to allow the return of their children. In a certain way, moreover, the family, when they “meet” the centre, could be intended as a particular group that aims to operate, when the moments and circumstances vary, according to the basic assumptions hypothesized by Bion (1961, 1971). So, a psychologist, when he/she puts his/her marks and when he/she provides his/her references, will act with awareness of the fact that if a family system sees the centre as a hostile and opposing element, then the assumption attack-escape will be the consequence (Guénoun, Attigui, 2020); He/she could, that is, hope that a new situation will lead to the satisfaction of his/her needs(Messianic hope) or follow the unconscious conviction according to the fact that someone could arrange for the satisfaction of his/her needs and wishes according to the basic assumption of dependency.

Clinical exemplifying: the moment in which the treatment takes shape

This is the story of Sara (a nine years old girl), Giacomo (a seven years old boy), Matteo (a five years old boy) and Giuseppe (a eighteen months old little boy), all minors received in the centre because their mother, just separated and involved in a new relationship, couldn’t take care of her children and commended them to her own mother, who, then- as she was in difficulties as to the care of her grandchildren- asked for the social work’s help and accepted the introduction of the children to the community centre. Telling this story is very important because the introduction of these children to the centre soon set in motion such a lot of critical situations that lead the involved professionals to very different positions and points of view. It didn’t seem like being in front of minors who had known and suffered a total emotional lack or abandonment/neglect, it didn’t seem like being in front of a high and extreme sanitary decay, nor at least in front of a socioeconomic deprivation. These children showed- outwardly- evident signs of a lack of rules and regulation; moreover, psychomotor flutter and aggressiveness were omnipresent in their conduct. The dominant feature of these children was a game activity characterized by a constant and over the top agitation. This family unit was already known to the social work services and the school they attended had given information about problems related to the personal hygiene of the children (sometimes, they presented a certain rankness and smelliness), but especially related to bruises on their body (it wasn’t ever possible to “identify” the origin of those bruises). Actually, writings show a connection between hyperactivity, aggressiveness, extreme reactions and several forms of mistreatment or abuse (Patros, Alderson, Kasper, Tarle, Lea, Hudec, 2016; Johnston, Mash, 2001), but it’s difficult to link up a sign or several signs and an objective and defined situation of mistreatment. In the centre the operators interacted with children whose management was extremely difficult and who, above all, had difficulty as to the sharing of the same spaces. Especially the eldest of these brothers and sisters, as pointed before, showed aggressiveness, in its great disfunctionality, when they played games. The opportunity to let- or don’t let- the children live together in the same centre became a matter that was discussed by the centre team, by the centre professionals and the involved services. Sometimes the interventions originate with regard to the available resources, so the fact of counting, in
this specific case, on a structure composed of three different flats, but next to each other, lead to consider the possibility to separate these children: this represented the first difficult moment, as the proximity of the spaces didn’t preserve, in someone’s opinion, from the separation trauma. But the intervention moved towards the placement in different flats: Sara, Matteo and Giuseppe stayed together, even if in different rooms, in the centre with the youngest of their brothers (especially in view of the age of Matteo and Giuseppe, who were together in the same room), while Giacomo was placed in the flat next door, together with his peers. This decision, with regards to implicits, was possible only after team debates in which were involved the psychologists working in the centre, the social worker, the manager and the educators who communicated their opinion in reference to the principle that expresses that “brothers and sisters couldn’t be separated”, but, too, and especially working on their own resonances, on their being brothers and sisters, on their being parents of little brothers and sisters and, moreover, concentrating on the dynamics existing “inside” the specific target group (this happened on a level with the inner team, as the debate, according to the procedure, happened with the colleagues of the Town Social Services, of the Family Clinic and of the Pediatric Neuropsychiatry). It was important to work on “prejudices”, on “implicits”, because we could understand that it’s our personal experience that often leads our actions, the “ethical” principle, the “common sense”, that, even if they are often fundamental, in definite situations, can lead to not enough gauged actions.

In the immediate situation, the effects of that choice were meaningful as to the separation; this clearly happened in fact only during some moments of the day, for example, at breakfast time, when the children went to bed or learned, but they were then often involved in default common activities inside the centre (workshop and leisure/recreational activities, for example). The fact that they could experience important moments of the everyday reality without their brothers or sisters, let Sara and Giacomo (especially) seize the opportunity to experience the relation to each other in a different way: anyhow, the stage was different. They weren’t at school, they weren’t at home. The contact with other children and the experience of playing games and sharing with other children in a community centre allowed them to acquire basic limits, that represented something new, a great difference compared with the previous situation, characterized by the absence of bulkheads: the control size seemed to be completely absent. When the game situation during the first month of their introduction in the centre was observed, it was possible to spot, as above-mentioned, a total absence of the idea of limit: any game became soon an occasion to run, push, shout, but not in a conflict situation, rather in a mood of uncontrollable cheerfulness, of almost hysterical laughter, broken only by someone’s crying that hurt himself/herself. Behaviour and emotions’ regulation was actually absent. So, during the following months, the work with these brothers and sisters consisted in alternating “loneliness” experiences (shared with other children living in the centre) and game experiences with their brothers; this game was, however, structured and shared with the educators, so that the children could acquire rules and limits. In fact, the regulation capacity and ability that they earned in peer situations, but not with their brothers, was scarcely “exported” to the game situation in which the brothers were involved and where the usual ways, without the presence of an adult, immediately overcame any kind of new learning.

This happened in concert with the work carried on by the team in relation to all of the other contexts which the children belonged to, above all the context of their family. Their parents became soon the root of the professionals’ (working in the centre) daily work.

Their mother, after a short living together time with her new partner, for her children own good decided to live again with her husband. The couple’s pressing on the centre
and firstly on the Social Work became something tiresome. These two adults’ manners, in fact, gave the opportunity to understand the mode, expressed during the game, of the brothers: there wasn’t the concept of limit. The inclination to “go over the edge” was expressed through different conduits: the way of expressing these ones, the way of managing the realationships with the others, the physical appearance. The manner marked more the mother than the father but, together, the couple shared the same operation, and proposed to the their conversation partners a change of roles, the father often showed a demure behaviour and was inclined to stay in the background, but was able to “perform” like his wife, who was “overflowing”.

The case description, necessarily, won’t be exhaustive and will focus only on some parts that are considered important in order to describe the work done with these parents. The intervention on the couple, acted out by more Services, among them the centre psychologists, was necessary just for the constant attempts by the parents to turn upside down any rules, any limit of meeting set by the centre where their children lived. And not only this, because every visit became an occasion to break, once more, any behavioral order that had been given before: for example, from the presents for their children (food, in an exaggerated amount and quantity and that weren’t “appropriate” as to a balanced diet: the children were all overweight, like their parents) to the messages written to them (all of these messages were related to an immediate and unreal release, to - in the same way- an unreal description of the beautiful things the children would find at home and of the changes that had made their bedroom so lovely). It’s important and necessary to specify that the work wasn’t done during a short period of time and that the children lived in the centre for over two years. The first step of the intervention with the parents consisted in defining- strictly- the limits: regard and respect of visiting hours, necessity of following instructions as to specific conducts, importance of no meeting the children in certain places, total prohibition of going to the school attended by the children (this was a very problematic context, as the parents saw it as a hostile and adverse place). This action related to the defining of limits was a great challenge because, especially during the first months, the attacks by this couple of parents were many and violent. The mediation work done together with the educators of the centre was remarkable, because the educators were the ones who suffered the most of the pressing consequences: their action was always and constantly disqualified (for example, during the visits, they let remark the minimal smear in the clothes rather than scratches or bruises). The burden of this situation (for the operators) consisted especially in the assault against the operators rather than in the way the parents accused them (in specific moments of the relation with the operators): the professional was denigrated, made feel guilty, constantly assailed during the visits and, too, when he/she was seen outside of the centre, rather than in places where he/she was met. Once again, there wasn’t any “limit”. In the meanwhile, the professionals worked in order to make the parents aware of the necessity of going to the family clinic (this was another place experienced in an anxious way, as evaluation and judging place). The relation to the Services was important for the centre professionals and also for the parents. It was clear this time for the centre, more than in any other moment, that the constant contact with the Services and the construction of a coherent and shared relation proposal to give to the pair would have been fundamental. As to the parents, in fact, the Town Social Service, represented by a social worker in particular, was seen as a comfortable place, therefore subject to an immoderate and symbiotic relation proposal, that saw especially the mother in search of kindness, sympathy and help, but also as a source of problems (the introduction to the centre was proposed by the social worker), so that there was a cautious size, combined with denigrating and sometimes intimidating manners.
On the contrary, the proposal of going to a family clinic, posed as a service that allowed to get help as they were a pair who had experienced difficult times (among them a separation), was totally rejected because they feared the appraisal and the husband didn’t accept the idea of facing the infidelity and abandonment of his spouse. It isn’t necessary to put in a word to explain that these manners, in general going overboard and fluctuating, together with all of the critical phases and the experiences related to the pair relationship, fell upon their children, “activating” them, overexciting them, troubling and worrying them.

That tertiary position, that could be ascribed to the centre, allowed to the professionals to get close-gradually- the two adults: the coherence of the relation proposal and the constant willingness towards the “confrontation”, despite the steady censure of many procedures that were considered disfunctional, allowed the pair to acknowledge the centre, especially the psychologists (seen and experienced in a “more tertiary” position compared with the educators, seen as “competitors”, as an available “comparison” for their children) as conversation partners who try to open up to. The visits, in fact, began to become that small stage where, especially the children’s mother, tried to stage the role of the good mother, able to accept advices, concentrating hard on involving her husband in activities to be shared with their children. During these visits, mainly at the beginning, the parents showed a disfunctional behaviour, not only as to the contents (inappropriate messages and texts, “exagerated” presents), but as to the manners, too: the father sat in a corner of the room, the mother on the other side. There wasn’t any interaction between the two adults. What stared in the face was their distance: during the visits, each of them concentrated on some of their children singly (even if it was possible to spot stable “diads/duos”: mother/Sara, father/ Giacomo), so that the visits or meetings became a “procession” of the children from one side to the other of the room (the spouse always chose to sit far the one from the other). Scenes in which the parents drew to them all their children together, carrying on any kind of conversation or just sharing a moment of affection, were absent.

These manners, in certain situations, became a moment of debate with the parents, who were given instructions, during a visit, to “engage” their children in a different way. For example, it was suggested not to attack Matteo, when the “management” of her son was too difficult. She, actually, had to manage Matteo and Giuseppe, the youngest of her children, at the same time and the eldest daughter, who always sat next to her and was involved in a constant chit-chat with her mother, a real monologue, as the mother wasn’t able to give her leeway because of the fact that she was quite wrapped up with her littlest children. It was suggested to the mother not to get angry with Matteo, but especially to get involved her husband, always standing by on the other side of the room, in silence, his second-born child next to him. The acceptance of the suggestion allowed us, first of all, to verify how the mother tried to involve her husband and so, to verify the interaction of the pair and the coordinated management of their children. In the meanwhile, every attempt became a concrete opportunity to act, in order to get a further feedback, able to gauge opportunely, at the right time, the couple interaction, at least during the visits.

The possibility to create a trust relationship, based on the fact that the pair had perceived the real, concrete intention to help by the centre professionals, allowed to try to see a gleam as to other critical situations: the carelessness experienced by the children before their settling in at the centre, the bruises noticed by their teachers, the problems of the spouse. There was an attempt to talk about these themes, to reflect in order to, then, go into the problem in more depth in the family clinic. It would be nice to tell about a positive and coherent progression, but unfortunately it wasn’t the case. As it often happens, the couple relationship had its ups and downs and it showed all the typical daily life things: mourning, problems at work,
critical situations experienced by the children, tiredness showed by the operators and so on. The greatest conquest was the fact that the parents at the end came out with the availability to cooperate and to bring themselves into question. This wasn’t enough to change the pair working, but it allowed to make them more “permeable “as to an external intervention and action and to understand, anyway, how inappropriate some manners were (for example, the one to go to school an hour before school finished, staying in front of the main entrance and being at loggerheads- at the end- with the school staff). Finally, the children could go back home, also thanks to the start of a House Education Service: it was clear to the operators that it was important to carry on working on the concept of border and respect of the limits (De Luca Picione, 2017).

Conclusion

The mandate of any structure that hosts a minor is, consists in “working in order to make itself unnecessary”. The centre should be a passage place, a moment in the minors’ and family life, a temporary support in a life path that must always aim for autonomy. It doesn’t mean this is always easy or possible. The possibility to accomplish this important mission has to do with the inevitable engagement of the operators and, in particular, of the psychologist with his/her work on more fronts and at different levels: the psychologist has to meet with families, operators, minors, services, keeping and creating thinking and maneuver “spaces” to make the change first thinkable and then real. The families of origin are often multi-problematic but they always represent an essential element as to working with minors, when the children go back home and when different measures -as to the protection of the minor- are adopted. Working with the family of origin means allowing to the minor to enrich his/ her own emotional and relation experience, by acknowledging disvalue and disfunctionality elements, too; it means, anyway, to create a history made of continuity in our guests’ life.

Doing this it’s at least necessary to give up a univocal view and to question our professional function and us as to our prejudices and the involved levels. Our task consists in receiving and proposing the complexity that is intrinsic to every relationship. Only acting this way we can show by our actions, better than with our words, that change is possible and that we can anyway try to look for an integration with functional and positive elements of the own family history.

References


