

The approach of triangular exit work - in a tandem team process

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Triangular tandem support is an innovative concept of exit work and mentoring that has a particularly high potential for sustainable effects of rehabilitation and resocialisation.

The procedure of triangular exit work envisages that the person willing to leave or change is jointly supervised by two exit facilitators who work together closely as a tandem team and can and should have a variety of internal differences. The two members of the tandem team may be of different sexes or represent different age groups. Or they may follow a different methodical orientation in their work and have different training and work experience. This may also be reflected in the fact that the two members of the tandem team belong to different organisations in which different sectors of society may be represented, although they may also be interrelated through the history of social conflict.

For example, a tandem team may consist of two facilitators, one of whom works predominantly in the field of social work or socio-therapeutic approaches and comes from an organisation employing mostly local nationals from a Christian background, while the other works predominantly in the field of religious and ideological mentoring and is anchored in an organisation that mainly employs staff from a Muslim background.

These differences and the consensual, competent and transparent way in which the two members of the tandem team deal with these differences within the work setting represent an essential resocialising factor of the triangular mentoring and exit work approach. This is because it involves practising the important social skill of recognising and dealing with differences, diversity and relativity and experiencing diversity together with the client, which is the essence of a humane and peaceful life in freedom. Extremists, in turn, vigorously reject, negate and fight against differences, diversity and relativity - tragically misjudging the fact that differences cannot be negated at all within the framework of the human condition and therefore always find their way back, even in the most extremist organisations. The fact that the tandem team in the triangular exit work setting practices exactly this art of living and dealing with differences, diversity and relativity and practices

it together with the client in a way, has great impact as an preventive factor against all forms of extremism.

The conditions for testing the triangular tandem procedure with the Austrian pilot project (2017/18) were very favourable. On the one hand, there were socio-educational and social work organisations available which were mostly staffed by local nationals from a Christian background. On the other hand, organisations were involved that practised religious and ideological mentoring and whose staff overwhelmingly came from a Muslim immigrant background. Thus, in several respects, different poles and perspectives of interaction were available which is favourable and necessary for the cooperation in a triangular tandem process.

All the more reason to expect that the concept of triangular exit work in a tandem team process will enable Austria to once again write an important chapter in the history of preventing extremism in Europe, since a procedure of this kind has not yet been systematically implemented by a national programme.

The theoretical foundations and strategic advantages of triangular exit work

The method of triangular exit work rests on the theoretical foundations of biographical studies, social and clinical psychology, relational psychodynamics, and pedagogy – and it has important strategic advantages in view of resilience building in liberal democratic societies.

(1) The clinical and relational psychology foundation of triangular exit work.

From the point of view of psychology and relationship dynamics, it can be stated that in a tandem process the pedagogical relationship with the client is "triangulated". This means that work takes place in a tripartite relationship and is therefore considerably more extensive in its relationship dynamics compared to the standard setting of one-on-one counselling – and thus also gains in complexity, inner diversity and pedagogical impact. This three-way relationship thus also contains an additional element of free choice between (at least) two possibilities, which are personified in the two exit facilitators, so that one could also speak of a "freedom pedagogical" approach. This means that the client in the tandem relationship with two facilitators always has two relationship options in every situation, which offers alternatives but also requires them to make a free decision and thus exercise their freedoms. Thus, in triangular settings, beyond the one-on-one of two persons, relationship and self-competence is built up to an increased degree on the level of social and emotional skills – which always also has an effect on cognitive abilities.

From a pragmatic point of view, triangular relationships can promise to provide greater alternatives and flexibility of (inter-)action for all stakeholders and be more resilient to irritations and disturbances. This is mainly due to the fact that triangulated relationships or tripartite relationships cannot be manipulated as easily as in the case of two-party relationships. There are always feedback and mediation possibilities in a tripartite relationship which protect against being taken over by one of the participants in a manipulative, over-powering or passive-aggressive way. These feedback and mediation possibilities also result in higher commitment and more sustainability in the work relationship, which is an inherent element of tripartite relationships because the third person can always testify to, elaborate on or comment on what is said in a tripartite relationship.

The experience of manipulability, vagueness and limited commitment in two-person mentoring relationships is very common among practitioners of social services. Because in the practice of social work there are often constellations of multiple care by different social services (family welfare, youth work, probation service, etc. ...). And colleagues often perceive that the clients sometimes present themselves quite differently, depending on which social worker they talk to. Sometimes the experience is also made that the client is not sincere or that s/he tries to play the different social workers off against each other. In any case, there is often some confusion among colleagues about how to imagine the authentic personality of the client. Or, to speak in the context of exit work in prisons, there are great differences between the assessment of the exit workers and the perceptions of the prison or intelligence agencies. In a three-way relationship such confusions and divergences can be dealt with in a very proactive way.

From a psychoanalytical/psychodynamic and social-psychiatric point of view, it can be added that the term triangulation or triad is used as an important technical term that refers to an inner-psychological structure or a certain psychological stage of development.¹ When a person has a triangulated mental relationship structure, he or she has acquired the ability in his or her developmental history to maintain mature relationships, which means in particular that he or she is able to act successfully in a context of multipolar, multifaceted relationship structures - and to recognise the fundamental diversity and relativity of human life and to deal with it successfully and peacefully. Therefore, in this psychological tradition, "the entire human mental and psychological development is understood as consisting of several stages of triangulation" (ibid.).

A person with a mentally internalised triangulated relationship structure is therefore well equipped to avoid becoming dependent on another person or to be impressed by strong binary influences or manipulations. However, if a person has not been able to establish this triangulated mental relationship structure, they are at risk of succumbing to binary dependency, influence or manipulation. Of course, this also includes influences of radicalisation. In addition, it can be noted that people with a lack of triangulation experience/ability tend to experience great psychological instability, especially with symptoms associated with borderline disorders. This is all the more remarkable in view of the fact that in the case of hate crimes, violent crimes and violent extremist offences in particular, psychological disorders with symptoms associated with borderline disorders

¹ [https://de.wikipedia.org/wiki/Triangulierung_\(psycho-analysis\)](https://de.wikipedia.org/wiki/Triangulierung_(psycho-analysis)) and:
[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Triangulation_\(psychology\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Triangulation_(psychology))

are often present.

The successful development of a triangulated mental relationship structure can, under the most favourable circumstances, already be achieved in the first years of life - and, psycho-dynamically speaking, is based on the "internalisation of three 'whole' personal relationships". "Whole" is understood here as an already successfully triangulated, relativised relationship, "including all also opposing parts of a respective relationship person ('good' and 'bad' etc.)". These "three personal relationships concern the relationship of the child 1) to the mother, 2) to the father and 3) to the relationship of the parents to each other," whereby the advanced "psychoanalytical object relationship theory" considers the "triadic relationships to be effective even in early childhood" and do not assume a purely dyadic relationship to the mother.

Applied to the field of triangular exit counselling, the significance of the third relationship level comes to the fore. This is because the relationship between the two exit facilitators of the tandem team would have to be placed on this third level. Thus, what we previously referred to as the "consensual, competent and transparent way" in which the two members of the tandem team within the exit setting cultivate (their) differences would take place at this level. Above all at this third triangulation level, learning takes place in the field of the "fundamental diversity and relativity of human life", which is not mastered nor desired by extremists in particular - and which must be learned by exit clients all the more urgently.

Thus, the perspective of psychodynamics and developmental psychology confirms our assumption that the triangular approach to mentoring and exit work has a very high potential for effective resocialisation.

In view of these findings, it would seem questionable to conceive an intensive pedagogical intervention solely or predominantly in a two-person setting, because this setting would have to be regarded as inappropriate from the point of view of developmental psychology.

(2) Biographies/ biographical studies as the foundation of triangular exit work

The effectiveness of triangular settings in deradicalisation and exit work can also be illustrated using biographies/ biographical studies. For the general experience of practitioners in the field shows that triangulated relationships are the exact opposite of the kinds of relationships that have prevailed in the biographies of people from violent extremist scenes and which they - in an involuntary dynamic of repetition - then seek out and recreate within the respective extremist scene. (In this, the biographies of extremist persons are also similar to those prevalent in other contexts that are non-free, dependency-oriented, anti-human rights and anti-democratic, e.g. in gangs, sects, and families of a certain type of abusive relationship).

It can be observed, for example, that extremists of all kinds come predominantly from single-parent families or from otherwise dysfunctional family relationships. In one of the two biographical and relationship types predominantly to be found, binary parent child relationships between two persons prevailed, which were sometimes symbiotic and undifferentiated – i.e. not triangulated; or else the relationship between the two was very strained. Most often, the actual physical absence of the father was the key factor, while the mother acted as a single parent. In the second type of family biography a rather diffuse, undefined family group dynamic could be found. In this case the psychological absence of the fathers in diffuse large family contexts is mostly the key factor.

Both the diffuse, undefined family group dynamics and the symbiotic or strained two-person parent-child relationship correspond exactly to what is also effective in violent extremist and non-free milieus. The symbiotic - not triangulated - one-on-one relationship is reflected in the leader relationship, which may be characterized by charismatics, while the diffuse, undefined group dynamics express themselves in the follower crowd or in the spontaneous group dynamics, from which violence escalates.

Both the symbiotic two-person relationship and the diffuse, undefined group dynamics are based on non-triangulated mental relationship structures. The excursus into relational psychodynamics and attachment theory may have made it all the clearer to what extent working in triangular settings or in tripartite relationships is an important prerequisite for exit work and deradicalisation.

(3) The strategic – and social, resilience-related – foundations of triangular exit work

If a local national social worker from a Christian background who practices a pedagogical or socio-therapeutic approach of mentoring, works in tandem with a colleague from a Muslim immigrant background who uses methods of religious/ ideological mentoring, then this may produce a series of positive effects that support prevention and social resilience.

- First of all, the clients will receive a highly effective procedure of exit facilitation because a triangular setting is in place which is optimised by the fact that the two practitioners belong to quite different methodological and demographic sectors, but nevertheless have the same function - and cooperate well with each other despite and precisely because of their differences and diversity.
- In addition, the clients will also be able to experience and actively take part in an exercise in social diversity in which diversity occurs directly, is actively and productively handled and communicated and is directed towards a common objective which is highly relevant in social respects.

- This inter-sectional cooperation and the effect of getting to know each other and mediating differences in view of a common end will not only have an effect on the client but also on the practitioners themselves and indirectly on their supporting organisations. This means that the colleague from a local Christian background who employs a pedagogical or socio-therapeutic approach of mentoring and the colleague from a Muslim immigrant background whose approach involves religious mentoring, will get to know and appreciate each other better during their direct cooperation and the subsequent phases of joint reflection. They will have a profound experience of effective cooperation on the basis of their diversity – and they will be able to share this experience with their colleagues in their supporting organisations and in the field of prevention as a whole.
- From here, one can easily realise that this shared professional working practice can ultimately also have an impact on the two areas of society from which the two exit workers come - the area of Christian background local nationals and the area of citizens with a Muslim immigrant background.
- This experience of getting to know and appreciating each other is all the more helpful because there is a massive polarisation of the professional field of exit work in many countries, which follows the precise lines of conflict described here. Organisations which are working with approaches of pedagogical or socio-therapeutic mentoring and are mainly run by employees with a Christian local background stand in opposition to organisations which apply approaches of religious mentoring and are mostly staffed with colleagues with a Muslim immigrant background. Moreover, there often seems to be a history of mutual suspicions about the presumed weaknesses or inadequacies of the respective other method – as well as a history of disappointments and failed relationships in mutual contact.

We can thus summarise: It is evident from both the point of view of pedagogics and developmental psychology that an intervention by means of triangular forms of relationships through tandem teams should always be the means of choice in order to achieve maximum impact in settings of intensive pedagogical and/or counselling work. This is particularly true for facilitating exit from violent extremism because in extremism the principles of independent relationships, diversity, relativity, triangulation and freedom are directly and fundamentally threatened. Moreover, triangular exit work in a tandem process can also have a powerful social synergy effect, which contributes to the inclusiveness of the professional field as well as the community in general. For at the societal level, triangular exit work can strengthen the resilience of society as such, so that it becomes immune to the numerous forms of extremism, incitement to hatred, group resentment, populism and forms of dependent, unfree relationships. We can specifically promote social resilience by informing the public in suitable (anonymised) ways about the topics, stories and processes that arise in triangular exit work.

The psychological and biographical foundation of the triangular approach can be poignantly underlined by two sayings which one may coin about relationship interventions: The saying: "Two are a couple, three are a group" draws attention to the fundamental difference between settings of two and three people. The saying: "More than three are either a dynamic group or an escalating crowd" (depending on the social/ relational and self-demarkation skills of the individuals involved),

draws attention to the implications of group dynamics – and criminological aspects – of triangulation and triangulation skills.

(3)

From a practical point of view, the implementation and further development of a triangular tandem setting for exit work is a quite complex and challenging endeavour which will require much learning in the process. Two clearly recognisable challenges can be mentioned right away.

- (a) The exit facilitators who until now have largely worked in an individual setting must first adjust to working together in a tandem system. This may not be easy at first since triangular work requires permanent communication in two directions and sometimes also in two different modes or tones. Furthermore, this sort of interaction will also have to be much more self-reflexive and transparent than was necessary in conventional one-on-one counselling. This is because the two tandem team members should, to a certain extent, also openly inform each other during the process about the how and why of their respective (inter)actions – i.e. speak more transparently and sincerely about their method and the reasons for their (inter)actions in the presence of the client. This can and should also be done in a searching and questioning mode which may also be controversial at times. For example, the two colleagues in the tandem team would also talk about whether or not it is appropriate to confront the client with a particular question or address him/her in a particular way - and they might be unsure or disagree. In turn, the client would, of course, be involved and be given a voice of their own.

Hence, there is a need for training and counselling by which the facilitators are prepared and accompanied in working together in a tandem system and practising this mode of transparent, sincere and self-reflexive interaction in a triangular bidirectional communication.

Furthermore, one needs to be aware that some clients may feel partly, momentarily or fundamentally overtaxed by the unfamiliar tandem setting, even if most of them will spontaneously find it stimulating and helpful – having gone through many one-on-one counselling relationships, often more than one at a time, and frequently finding them frustrating. Therefore, it seems recommendable to follow an undogmatic and flexible procedure in tandem work, which recognises the particular needs and limitations of each individual client, without losing sight of the key purpose of the intervention, which is facilitating exit from violent extremism and group hatred by conveying and strengthening skills of navigating triangular and diverse relationships in settings of three and more people.

For instance, if there are moments or situations of overstrain or disturbance that can be attributed to the triangular setting and which may entail that a client proves largely

inaccessible due to the tandem situation (possibly because of gender-related issues), then the facilitators can always offer to temporarily switch to a two-person setting. For one of the most important basic rules of social and counselling work says: If a setting does not work then one should first try to change the setting, because it is well known that disturbances related to the setting can hardly be remedied by other means.

Nevertheless, for principle reasons, the focus on the triangular setting should never be entirely abandoned, even if, in the worst case, one might have to limit oneself to only having the first two, the last meeting and possibly one in-between in a group of three. For as already mentioned, the triangular setting is inherent in the purpose of the intervention, namely to facilitate exit from violent extremism which, in any form of extremism, rejects and fights diversity, difference and relativity. To say it by way of a somewhat pointed hypothesis about a possible criterion for a successful exit process: Anyone who is not yet able to speak freely and interact sincerely in a setting with two different facilitators and who therefore cannot yet deal with the complexity and relativity of tripartite relationships (e.g. who cannot refrain from trying to act divisive and pit the two tandem facilitators against each other) has basically not yet achieved a full exit.

It may therefore make sense to measure a successful exit process by the ability to deal with complex, multipolar interactions in a sincere, sustainable and personally satisfying manner. In practice, this criterion may even prove to be more meaningful than an always questionable, possibly changeable commitment to certain values and attitudes, such as democracy or non-violence. This understanding of a successful exit would then be measured not only by attitudes, but also by important personal skills in the area of communication, relationships and self-regulation. Especially since these abilities –dealing with triangular, multipolar and diverse constellations of interaction – also constitute the essence of free, democratic and human rights-based societies, they are of even greater importance for the clients of exit work.