Article

Youth Work and Serendipity: Some Anthropological Implications

Federico Pozzoni [ID]

Nationalism Studies Program, Central European University, Budapest 1051, Hungary;
Pozzoni_Federico@student.ceu.edu

Abstract: This article explores the anthropological notion and methodology of serendipity as applied to youth work and non-formal education training methods. I introduce the term and its uses by drawing connections to the concept of ethnographic fieldwork and strategy to approach anthropological contexts. I then draw a parallel between the role of the anthropologist and the youth worker. I investigate the different options when dealing with groups and facing the contradictions of conducting fieldwork or trainings. Thus, I propose a distinction between the anthropological concept of 'serendipity' and the youth work-related concept of 'improvisation'. I present ambiguous cases of the serendipity process and their implications based on my own direct experience of involvement with youth work through the methodology of autoethnography. Finally, I address different perspectives of serendipity seen as a storytelling construction. Ultimately, I draw useful conclusions on the understanding of serendipity and improvisation in the two contexts.

Keywords: serendipity; youth work; anthropology; non-formal education; Erasmus+

1. Introduction

This article explores the anthropological notion and methodology of serendipity as applied to youth work and non-formal education training methods. In the first part, I introduce the term with a particular focus on its connections with the concept of ethnographic fieldwork and strategy to approach anthropological milieus. I then draw a parallel between the figures of the anthropologist and the youth worker. I investigate the different options when dealing with groups and facing the contradictions of conducting fieldwork or trainings, examining similarities and differences in the conceptualization of a univocal understanding of serendipity in the two contexts. While a comparison could be traced between the main facets of anthropologists and youth workers, differences will emerge in their respective relation to their communities of reference. Consequently, difficulties in the management of serendipity when dealing with the outputs of research and youth work practices will lead to the second part of the article, in which I present ambiguous cases of the serendipity process and their implications based on my own direct experience. Several of these implications will lead to the formulation of two distinct definitions according to the field. Indeed, in the context of youth work, I suggest a preference for the term 'improvisation' as a counterpart to the term serendipity in the anthropological context. I then refer to the political inferences of dealing with young people from a distant and external point of view, which entails the recognition of the role of youth workers and, at the same time, the difficult relations with official project sponsors. Furthermore, I address different perspectives of serendipity seen as a storytelling construction. Drawing from methodological differences in the practice of youth work and anthropology, I ultimately highlight different possible applications of the notions of serendipity and improvisation.

2. Methodological Notes

The collection of data to be analyzed derives from a multi-sited ethnography with an insider perspective. As proposed by George Marcus (1995), multi-sited ethnography allows one to explore transnational processes in a globalized world-system of people, ideas, and commodities. Focusing on mapping strategies to identify those objects of analysis without geographic boundaries, multi-sited ethnography permits a macro understanding of the topic while exploring the dynamics, objects, and relationships occurring over different times and spaces:

> [Multi-sited ethnography] moves out from the single sites and local situations of conventional ethnographic research designs to examine the circulation of cultural meanings, objects, and identities in diffuse time-space' (Marcus 1995, p. 96).

In the context of this article, I utilize this methodology to describe the process of serendipity in multiple spatial and temporal situations. Moreover, building on the perspective of insider ethnography described by Lawrence Hennigh (1981), among others, the analysis relies upon empirical data collected by myself as a key informant. The combination of the two approaches allows the practice of autoethnography to describe and analyze personal experiences in relation with their socio-cultural relevance (see also: O'Reilly 2009; Ellis et al. 2011).

3. Serendipity, Youth Work, and Anthropology

A few days after the writing of this paragraph, I was going to facilitate a training course. Twenty-seven participants from different European countries were about to come to our city to join a training course on migration issues and documenting migration through video-making techniques. As usual, my colleagues and I were late with the preparation. We had a draft of the general week's schedule, but we still could not plan the activities in detail. How did we reach this point? How do we always fall into such a situation? And how do we solve it?

To start answering this question, I would first introduce the concept of serendipity, believed to be coined by the 18th-century English novelist Horace Walpole based on the Persian fairy tale "The Three Princes of Serendip" (Van Andel and Bourcier 2011, p. 141). The main characters of the novel travel and make fantastic and unexpected discoveries. According to Merton and Barber (2004, p. 109), aside from the element of fortune in the findings, the discoverer also needs to be 'sagacious' (knowledgeable) enough to link together apparently innocuous elements in order to come to a valuable conclusion or understanding.

I believe that the example of my depicted situation is very common in youth work and training. Moreover, the constant situation of haste, quite often related to the "disease of being busy" in our digital and technological societies (Safi 2014), affects most youth workers, at least in the Erasmus+ Youth field, for several reasons. Is the concept of serendipity applicable to analyze this phenomenon?

I find it useful to introduce a comparison between youth work and anthropology. I rely on the definition of youth workers provided by the Support, Advanced Learning and Training Opportunities (SALTO)-Youth Training and Cooperation Resource Centre:

> Youth workers work with young people in a wide variety of non-formal and informal learning contexts, typically focusing on their young charges' personal and social development through one-on-one relationships and group-based activities. While acting as trainers/facilitators may be their main task, it is just as likely for youth workers to take a socio-educational or social work-based approach. In many cases, these roles and functions overlap (SALTO 2014, p. 7).

I also conceptualize youth workers following the definition of non-governmental organizations' (NGOs) workers in the field of development aid provided by Olivier de Sardan and Bierschenk (1993) concerning the African context. According to the authors, the "local intermediaries of development"

are those actors implanted as an intermediary in a local arena to drain external resources towards the social space corresponding to that arena. Consequently, I will concentrate on the role of youth workers as mediators and depositaries of both the senses and resources that they transmit to the beneficiaries (from now on: participants). Youth workers can thus be analyzed as part of a network in which they act and are positioned. Caught in between personal drives or interests and public rhetoric from project sponsors, they implement strategies that affect the other constituents of their network (i.e., young participants from Europe and other possible stakeholders with whom they wish to interact to develop their own organizations).

My direct experience and examples of youth work are specifically connected with the experience of the Erasmus+ Program in the field of Youth, and therefore, the training, coordination, and implementation of youth exchanges, training courses, and international volunteering activities for young people aged 14 to 30. The projects funded by the Erasmus+ Youth program are implemented at a local level with international participants. Erasmus+ is the European Union's funded program resulted from the merging of seven prior programs to support education, training, youth, and sport in Europe, and its grants are distributed by different National Agencies (European Commission 2017).
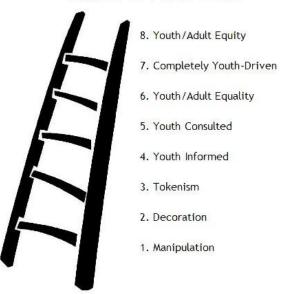
In anthropology, serendipity, as "the art of making an unsought finding" (Van Andel 1994, p. 631), becomes a core component of fieldwork research, whereas the main competence of the anthropologist is the capacity to observe what he/she is not prepared to see (Olivier de Sardan 1995, p. 75). As Le Courant (2013) reformulates, how to be prepared for an 'unsought finding' is a central and paradoxical question for anthropological research and for any discipline where inductive thinking is at the heart of the method—in our case, non-formal education and training. As the anthropologists engage in participant observation, youth workers in the training context need to be at the same time part of and outside of the groups who are facilitating their work. Both figures deal with the difficult condition of immersing themselves into a community (of participants in the first case, informants in the second), but maintaining a "conceptual distance" (Rivoal and Salazar 2013). It is in this liminal status that serendipity occurs and contributes to the performative aspect of identity within an international group. The same process of "storming, norming, forming and performing", the original and most basic version of Bruce Tuckman (1965) model for group dynamics, constitutes a repertoire that is still alive for the process of group management during international youth projects to be guided by serendipitous entrepreneurs.

While in the traditional Malinowskian-style of fieldwork of anthropology the distinction between the anthropologist performing participant observation inside a community and the community was quite neat, Rivoal and Salazar (2013, p. 181) argue that the modern anthropologist faces the condition of the "neo-nomad", whereas 'otherness' is more difficult to be found in contemporary societies. Contrarily, the experience of youth workers (at least the ones working with European or international funds) is quite interesting because of its opposite condition: their raw material of participants is already interculturally mixed and intertwined, but they always need to refer to a local context of inclusion. Julie Giabiconi (2013, p. 207) goes further in arguing that "three selves" constitute the anthropologist: personal, ethnographic, and academic. At the same time, I propose to imagine three selves of the youth worker: personal, participant/trainer (depending on the occasion), and organization representative. Every youth worker in European-funded programs of international mobility have several agencies involved when performing a task: his/her personal engagement, the different role of either being a participant or a trainer with the consequent code of conduct, and the NGO/association that he/she is representing.

Similar to anthropologists, youth workers need to immerse themselves in communities to achieve participant observation—being part of the training group whose dynamic they have to facilitate. At the same time, they have to keep a distance to remain objective and neutral, and this already comes with the fact that they generally do not participate directly in the activities but only supervise and guide the participants in peer-to-peer exchange. Anthropologists usually have privileged informants during ethnographic fieldwork—extraordinary people who usually have a deeper perspective on their
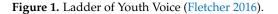
own society or group of interest, they help the ethnographer to be introduced in the community and influence the development of research findings. Even though they are key informants, they also expose the researcher to bias and might affect the feature of spontaneity in the serendipitous process. To put it in the words of Denis Laborde (2011, p. 153): "serendipity is not only about meanings and situations, but may as well account for creating the illusion of spontaneity. [. . .] serendipity as such cannot be really 'planned', but *the conditions facilitating the process can be manipulated*" (emphasis added).

In youth training contexts, focusing the attention on one or few 'privileged participants' can direct the whole output of a learning program towards something different than expected, enhancing the serendipitous nature of modeling a program according to the reaction and daily feedback of participants. A quite dated and simplistic version of the youth participation model (Hart 1992, see Figure 1), though still influential in youth work contexts, shows the degrees of involvement of young people in the decision-making process of adult society. Although much of the debate has concentrated on the two highest rungs and the vague concept of participation utilized by Hart, the validity of the ladder could be restricted to the identification of false types of participation (Barber 2007, p. 26). In this respect, manipulation (rung 1) can still be considered the lowest degree of taking part in a decision-making process, thus representing the minor step by which it is possible to start guiding young people (i.e., participants in youth exchange projects) in climbing up the ladder.

Figure 1. Ladder of Youth Voice (Fletcher 2016).

Opposite to youth workers, the anthropologist can be easily manipulated by his/her group of informants. Indeed, informants can reveal only part of the truth, and privileged informants can modify the research of the anthropologist according to their views and intuitions. On the other hand, the whole serendipity process for the elaboration of anthropological data collection has a lot in common with manipulation when considered as the "retrospective storytelling of events, situations or analytical processes involving 'accidental sagacity'" (Merton and Barber 2004, p. 2)—basically, as an *ex post* construction to prove the points of the research. Concerning such manipulative processes in youth work and, conversely, serendipitous processes in anthropology, some examples from my personal experience will show the complexity of their implications.

4. Field Experiences: Dealing with Youth Work and Research Outputs

Once, I was coordinating a youth exchange with a colleague of mine. At the end of the week, the goal was to perform a final event to give visibility to the project and to let participants express to the public the content of the week together (in this case, on the topic of active citizenship and youth participation). As we could not identify a specific place or idea (we would usually try to contact the local municipality to be included in a public event, but that time it was not possible), my colleague introduced the dilemma to the participants, asking them to develop an idea in order to self-plan and organize the final event. He suggested the example of 'doing a flash mob' to give a hint to the youngsters. Indeed, the only way we could manage the event was to do something spontaneous and outdoors during our only day trip to the city. A flash mob was the perfect option for us, and as my colleague mentioned it (pretending to be unintentional), the participants took that option for granted and started to organize it.

Davide Sparti (2005) argues that improvisation, transposed as a notion from jazz music to everyday life and creative thinking, is characterized in general by its irreversibility, as it stems from a consequent proceeding of inseparable instants. Supervising the process, we understood that some of the topics and methods proposed could have brought us trouble for lack of legal authorizations, especially if the mob had been too visible for passersby and had a strong political impact. However, the decision was, by then, irreversible. We then tried to guide the organization of the event to be inclusive and joyful for everyone, but in that moment, we also understood that we were manipulated by the program funding us. Anything that would have been too political could have raised complaints to the National Agency and European Commission, which could therefore cut our funding.

Political implications with sponsors are very problematic both for anthropologists and youth workers. There are several criteria for European Voluntary Service projects to be approved by the National Agency (distributing nationally the annual grants for the European Commission). The main one is that the program should be addressed to people with "fewer opportunities" (educational, geographical, economic, etc.). We are therefore happy to please our sponsors and also to commit and do something positive for our society, trying to respect this criterion in practice. However, in such situations, it appears the youth workers are only actors in a field where they have positional inferiority towards the institutions that provide the resources for local implementation. While as organizers we would have been considered directly responsible in the case of problematic events, we could not technically act without prior authorization from the National Agency. For instance, I was part of the coordination of a project between Europe and the Middle East, having Italy and Egypt as main reference points. The National Agency had put a lot of emphasis on the topics of refugees and intercultural dialogue in 2016–2017. The project got a very high score, and we had a visit from a group of youth workers to present our work. However, when it came to difficult situations concerning a particular volunteer, the answers from the National Agency's officials tended to be repeatedly delayed.

On some other occasions, to apply Olivier de Sardan and Bierschenk (1993) aforementioned metaphor, the draining of project resources in the local arena appeared controversial. For example, I could also experience the contradiction between the official proclamations and the reality in reverse. When I participated in my European Voluntary Service project in the Philippines, we had our arrival training with youth workers from Europe, and we had a few training sessions on the EU context and core values. Because it was my first time in Southeast Asia, it was very hard to accept a training on European borders and identity. Later, when I was employed in an NGO running European Commission-funded projects, I acquired a different perspective on this compromise. Truthfully, the Commission cannot intervene in visa processes and has no political capacity to influence embassies' decisions. From my side as a representative of an organization, I account for my political views and aims to be independent, but I am perpetrating the same mistakes for the sake of respecting the established terms of the projects. How wide should the acceptable moral gap be between real beneficiaries or participants' needs and what is written in the project applications? For me, the moral perspective changes according to which one of the "three selves" is chosen as the point of view.

My last case combines both the figure of the anthropologist and the one of the youth worker through the process of serendipity—or, at least, this is my "retrospective storytelling of events" (Giabiconi 2013, p. 199). I left for the Philippines with vague instructions on the project's aim. I applied because I felt the inspiration to go there; there was something quite unclear and attractive, which I usually identify as a situation leading to possible serendipity status. Once I had arrived, I discovered that my main task was to perform social research on the role of women in small-scale mining communities in the north of the country. I opted immediately for the methodology of ethnographic fieldwork, which included a one-month stay in a tribe of ex-headhunters in the mountain region and a twenty-day stay with a family near the coast. The project was funded by the U.S. Department of State, which in my mind had tremendous political and post-colonial implications. Nevertheless, I did my best both to prove myself and for the sake of the project. As Le Courant states, drawing from Fine and Deegan (1996), I embraced the opportunity in a situation where "using the notion of serendipity then appears more as a rhetorical strategy to justify a choice of object than as a real tool for knowledge" (Le Courant 2013, p. 195). The author also notes the experience of Clifford Geertz (1973), who discovered by coincidence his fieldwork interest in cockfights while trying to be accepted in the Balinese community, as one of the most famous examples of serendipity in anthropological practice.

The distance between 'being there' (during ethnographic fieldwork) and 'being here' (writing the research), conceptualized by Geertz (1988) himself, resumes the interpretative character of symbolic anthropology (not looking for a general "structure" of human mindset, but rather for the interpretation of symbols and different ways in which people put them into practice) and can be useful in summing up the comparison between anthropology and youth work. For the anthropologist, the serendipity process happens during ethnographic fieldwork (the prior 'being there'). In contrast, for youth workers, serendipity lies in the preparation for the training (the equivalent of 'being here'), before 'being there' with a group of participants. The content and methods of trainings can be modified and adapted after each experience, but during the performance of training in the field of non-formal education, the trainers are usually required to have a lot of flexibility.

Therefore, it seems that the concept of serendipity acquires various facets according to the different fields to which it is applied. Despite the many similarities between anthropologists and youth workers, especially related to group dynamics, in the context of youth work, 'improvisation' seems to be a better definition than 'serendipity' due to its irreversible character that can better account for responsibilities over group management and the leading of group dynamics. The features and practices can vary in different cases, and they could be investigated further in connection with other fields. Eventually, as a trainer, I managed to run the training course on migration with a little bit of improvisation. Indeed, as a researcher on social dynamics, I could also describe the example as a nice conclusion of a serendipitous process.

5. Conclusions

In this article, I have explored different meanings and examples of the concept of serendipity through the method of autoethnography. The term 'serendipity' derives from a novel, representing a state of wonder and unexpected discovery. It has been applied as such in the context of ethnographic fieldwork research for anthropological studies. In the first section, I have shifted the term to the context of youth work in order to introduce a comparison between the figures of the youth worker and anthropologist from the perspective of the process of serendipity. Social and spatial conditions, such as the multifaceted character of communities in contemporary societies and the lack of clearly bounded field or work space in which youth workers and anthropologists operate nowadays, appear as the main principles guiding the usage of serendipity. Moreover, following the "three selves" constituting the anthropologist identified by Giabiconi (2013)—personal, ethnographic, and academic—I have argued a similar triangulation for the youth worker, based on personal, participant/trainer, and organization representative. According to this definition, the aspects of manipulation and retrospective storytelling of the events have emerged as possible consequences of the application of serendipity.

Other connotations of serendipity have emerged from the discussion based on my own field experiences in the second part of the article. In particular, personal and political implications have been considered as factors influencing the overall strategy of the serendipity narration, especially at the stage of dealing with youth work and research outputs. Differences from the methodological perspectives between youth work and anthropology have arisen in defining a working understanding of serendipity that could be common to both disciplines. The distinction between Geertz's concepts of 'being there' versus 'being here', related to ethnographic fieldwork, is almost reversed in youth work dynamics. Ultimately, despite a similar conception being elaborated in the application of serendipity to youth work and anthropology, the choice for the concept of 'improvisation' seems to be more appropriate than 'serendipity' in the context of youth work.

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