

# CASE STUDY

Ahmed and Autonomy:

Re-thinking Roles,

Relationships and Mindsets



Co-funded by the  
Erasmus+ Programme  
of the European Union

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## Competence

Integrate theory and research into practice.

This involves taking positive action to develop your knowledge of lifelong career development processes, career guidance theory and practice, and other theoretical fields relevant to your work role. This includes access to recent research and consideration of applying it in practice.

## Abstract/Introduction/Background

The Case Study describes Ahmed's path of growth towards autonomy in his work and housing situation. He is aided by Cristina, who works as a guidance practitioner at "Fixo Desk" of CIOFS-FP professional training centre in Trieste, which provides support, training, and job placement for young people and adults.

## Key Words

- Autonomy
- Roles
- Relationships
- Mindsets
- theory and practice
- intrinsic motivation
- growth mindset
- mastery approach

## Key Characters

Ahmed (Client), Cristina (Guidance practitioner), social worker and host family

## The Case Study Story

### Initial situation

Ahmed arrived at the Ciofs-FP counselling and orientation service in Trieste after attending a computer course for adults at the same training centre.

The Professional Training Centre is an institution accredited by the Region that offers professional courses for young people over 14 years old and for adults, in particular in the commercial, tourist and administrative fields. Inside the centre, two operators manage the Fixo Desk, offering information, advice and support to those who want to choose the training course that best suits their professional expectations and attitudes; they also provide specific guidance advice to those who wish to plan their training, professional and work path. The Desk offers consultancy services to around a hundred users per year, including students from the training centre and external users.

It works in connection with the National Agency for Active Labour Policies supported by the Italian government

through the European Social Fund.

Ahmed needed support for an active job search and was assigned to Cristina, a 40-year-old counselling practitioner with a training in educational psychology and counselling.

At the beginning of her career Cristina worked with children and teenagers but later on she had the opportunity to work with adults in situations of great discomfort. This led her to choose a preventive approach, in order to intervene and try to give people help before the problem became serious.

Cristina's work style is characterized by a strong urgency to achieve the objectives agreed with clients, to the point that at times she excessively fears the risk that they interrupt their path or fail to obtain the desired results.

Ahmed, 21, was referred to COR by a social worker asking for support for an active job search. He is of Algerian origin and was not living with his family, who have had difficult times over the last ten years. He was living with a voluntary host family who was mentoring him until he could reach autonomy in terms of work and housing. He was in a sort of holding pattern since he had lost the factory job he had up to a few days before when his fixed-term contract was not renewed. As a result, he cancelled his plans to find an apartment on his own. Ahmed needed guidance for creating a new plan of action for work.

Ahmed arrived in Italy with his parents at the age of 9. The family always had financial difficulties, as his father worked intermittently and his mother never learned the Italian language. Two more children, now 11 and 7, were born in Italy. When Ahmed was 15, following incidents of domestic violence, the father was distanced from the family and they moved into a group home for mothers and children. Later, when Ahmed was almost 18, he moved first to a foster family and then into a youth group home. Later, the mother's parenting skills were considered inadequate and the younger siblings were also placed in a foster family to wait for Ahmed to grow up, become autonomous and eventually take care of them. His mother lived in a group home facility. In the meantime, while Ahmed lived away from his mother and siblings, they had arranged meetings with the family and others with only the children in the presence of a social worker. Although the family is separated, one social worker was assigned to the entire family.

### **Cristina's Plan**

The case workers who worked with Ahmed stated that it was difficult for him to take the initiative, make independent choices and meet deadlines without constant help and outside stimulus. Therefore, his guidance practitioner highlighted the need for Ahmed to become more proactive and independent in determining his path and making choices. She tried to identify what could most easily stimulate his intrinsic motivation to guide his actions and eventually require fewer and fewer suggestions from others.

Using psychological theories as a reference, it was deemed effective to apply the "growth mentality" as a tool to encourage the desire to acquire new skills, willingness to accept personal challenges and self-determination.

### **Growth Mentality**

According to Dweck (2000), people can have different beliefs about their intelligence and other personal characteristics. Those who have a "growth mentality" believe they can be cultivated through learning and effort, and is therefore malleable and improvable. Those with a "fixed mentality," however, consider intelligence and other personality traits as static and unchangeable. These two mentalities may correspond to different learning styles and basic objectives.

In fact, those who consider intelligence as a fixed entity experience tasks as a test of their own value: achieving a specific result constitutes a confirmation, while failure indicates a stable lack of ability. These subjects are defined as performance or confirmation oriented. They want to appear skilled and avoid appearing incapable. They can do this by choosing to play it safe, thus avoiding possible mistakes, and leaving difficult tasks for

others and not for themselves.

Those who interpret challenges as an opportunity to learn new things are defined as mastery or growth oriented: they are guided by the desire to increase and acquire new skills. Tasks that are too easy are seen as a waste of time and mistakes are seen as an opportunity for improvement. They often perceive setbacks as a necessary part of the learning process and react by increasing their motivational effort, without being conditioned by the threat of failure.

Attention is focused on self-evaluation in the first case, while in the second, it is focused on the most appropriate learning strategies for achieve results.

Numerous studies have shown that encouraging the growth mindset can have positive effects on school performance, commitment and motivation to learn.

Furthermore, scientific results show that offering the possibility to exercise a high level of autonomy when choosing among several options favours intrinsic motivation to complete the chosen task.

Cristina opted for this approach and, in keeping with the theory, planned to precisely and concretely define, along with Ahmed, the skills he wanted to acquire along the way, in order to guide him step by step in verifying and analysing the strategies put into place to achieve what he wanted. She believed it was essential that Ahmed directly experience autonomy when making the individual choices, so that he would be more motivated to maintain them over time.

For Cristina, using this working method meant working on her own mentality and preparing herself to notice even the slightest signs of change, even when it seems like the person is repeating the same behaviours without making any progress.

## Beginning Counselling

After an initial interview, the first step was having Ahmed decide what objectives he wanted to work on and prioritize them. Even if it took more time, Cristina limited herself to only asking questions to stimulate his aspirations, without suggesting or imposing too much. From information gathered from stories reported by Ahmed and his case workers, her impression was that in the past he had often been passively placed in paths determined by others.

At the first interview, Ahmed expressed the desire to find a job more suited to his character and needs than the previous one, that could also provide sufficient income for him to be able to live on his own (understanding that he would have to share a space with other tenants at the beginning). He wanted to have a space where he could have his siblings over for their meetings and they could feel at home.

Counselling took place on a weekly basis. It began with identifying appropriate sectors for the initial job search, taking into consideration the types of positions that could be accessible to him considering his diploma (qualification as an electrician and a high school degree in Maintenance and technical assistance) and his previous work experience (operator on numerical control machines). Ahmed was more interested in the second option and wanted to further specialize in the field through specific training, but at the moment he urgently needed to find a job. His residence permit was due to expire and in order to renew it he had to have an employment contract. He knew that he would probably have to accept a job that was less interesting than he wanted and that he would have to postpone any plans for further advancement until he was more financially stable. Ahmed and the guidance practitioner therefore agreed to start searching for jobs he would like, but also to consider jobs that he was qualified for.

The next step was to create a CV and cover letter. Ahmed already had one, but it needed to be updated and changed to fit the type of job. Although Ahmed had excellent knowledge of the Italian language, he needed

help writing a formal letter. The practitioner explained how to do it and asked him to prepare different versions of letters and CVs for the types of jobs he was seeking.

### Difficulties to Overcome

At the next meeting Ahmed came having completed the task only partially. The practitioner reviewed everything with him and was strongly tempted to complete what was missing for him, although he knew that the best way for Ahmed to acquire the skills related to actively looking for work was to give him more time and have him do it himself. Only then would he become autonomous and able to find a new job in the future, if and when the necessity arose. It was decided to have him complete the task for the next interview.

The next step was to send the CVs. The practitioner showed Ahmed several websites advertising job vacancies. At the next interview Ahmed reported that he had contacted several temp agencies with whom he had interviews, and had received some job proposals. He was reluctant to respond to direct announcements from companies, preferring instead to rely on an intermediary and saying that direct ads were harder to find.

The practitioner, having noted the risk of missing opportunities and the slow pace of the job search (Ahmed admitted to spending only a few hours a day looking for work, despite considering it a priority), began feeling frustrated that Ahmed did not follow the directions given, even if he said it was his clear intention to do so.

Cristina then consults with her colleague at the Desk about her frustration; he suggests that the fatigue she is experiencing at the moment is linked more to her own urgency to reach the goal than to Ahmed's difficulties. This made her realize that she has to be very careful about how to deal with Ahmed, to make the criticism balanced and constructive and not a judgement, and to eventually lead to mastery rather than performance.

Thanks also to the talk with her colleague, she tries to analyse with Ahmed the strategy he uses; they agree on a numerical and verifiable target for the week, so that next time it will be easier to review the steps taken. Ahmed aims to show up in person in at least 5 agencies and send at least 15 CVs. Then Cristina shows him again how and where to look for more job ads.

At the next meeting, Ahmed finally reported that he had completed his goals and it was decided that he would do the same the following week.

### Extension to other areas of life

Once the job search method was set up, while he was waiting for results from the various interviews, he was able to consider other objectives related to his relationship with his siblings and becoming more independent at home in preparation for when he would live on his own. The practitioner proposed that Ahmed include his other points of reference for these two areas: his social worker and the family he lives with.

Two meetings were arranged.

As for the first meeting, Ahmed stated that he would like to be more involved in the education his siblings, more informed about school and health issues, and more respected by the foster family. The social worker, however, highlighted the difficulties encountered in the past when Ahmed was involved, as he did not always respect visiting times and did not heed advice from the social worker on how to behave with minors, thus being considered unreliable. Objectives were then agreed upon to help him show greater reliability: to work on punctuality and propose activities to the social worker in advance for what to do with his siblings during their meetings.

These commitments were also shared with the host family so that Ahmed could be helped to remember schedules and deadlines, until he would become more autonomous in fulfilling them. Other everyday tasks also proved difficult (sending documents for renewing residence permits, applying for unemployment benefits...).

Cristina suggests that there should be a weekly meeting at the house of the family hosting him in order to find out how things were going at home, especially with money management and household chores. It was agreed that the family would help Ahmed keep track of monthly spending in order to help him set aside a sum equal to what could cover fixed expenses if he lived alone (rent, food, bills, gasoline), so that he could immediately get used to figuring out what he could and could not afford. Ahmed gave it to the family, and they would return it to him when he moved out, so that Ahmed would have money to pay for a deposit on an apartment and for any initial expenses. During periods like this, where Ahmed did not have a fixed income, he could withdraw from his savings and limit his expenses. With the help of his tutors, he decided on a weekly sum for essentials like gas, cigarettes and small emergency expenses. He committed to replenishing his savings as soon as he got a job again.

As for housekeeping, the family asked Ahmed for 3 hours of work per week.

At the beginning his tutors accompanied him in order to help him understand what to do and how to eventually manage a household on his own. They agreed to have group meetings periodically with everyone involved to measure his progress on the whole.

### Setbacks and Developments

After several attempts, Ahmed finally received a concrete proposal from a temp agency for a job as an electrician on a construction site, but, after passing the interview, when everything seemed final, he was informed that the construction site was temporarily suspended and that he would have to wait to be called. He was very disappointed: just when he believed he had finished his search, he had to start all over again and time was running out in order to renew his residence permit.

In the meantime, he also participated in selections for a training course for numerical control machines that was organized by a recruiting company. The course could have been an excellent opportunity to help him increase his chances of finding a job. Especially since he wasn't working, he was hoping to at least have this, but again, he was not chosen.

At this point he was demoralized, but after this first setback, he did not give up and started his search again.

Cristina supports him in these difficult moments, trying to reinforce his growth mentality, moving him from making sweeping judgements about himself to helping him analyse the attempts and tools already put in place to improve his job search methods. Together they decide that he will send a CV and ask for a fact-finding interview with all the temporary agencies with which he has not yet had contact and he will personally present himself to all those already known to check which job offers are currently active.

With the help of his guidance practitioner, he analysed his previous attempts and the tools already in place in order to assess how he could improve his method for finding a job. They decided that he would send a CV and ask for an interview with all of the agencies he hadn't yet contacted and that he would go in person to the agencies he was already in contact with to check in and see if there were any other new job offers.

At this point he knew that he had to accept the first valid offer in order to renew his residence permit. It came from a mechanical company looking for an unskilled labourer to work three shifts, including nights. Although it did not meet his ideal standards, he signed a contract for the first trial month. During this phase monitoring was set up to check his progress at work and compare it with his previous working experience, in order to try to keep his job and have the contract renewed.

In the meantime, progress in other areas was slow. The family reported that Ahmed needed constant calls to meet deadlines. For example, he was waiting until the last minute to schedule activities with his siblings. The tutors reminded him and suggested activities to propose, even pointing out useful websites for getting more information, but Ahmed did not use them. During one of the larger-group verification meetings with the

guidance practitioner, tutors said they sometimes found useful information themselves and gave it directly to Ahmed, even about other things (office hours for delivery of documents, for example). Social workers agreed this was not a good habit, as it didn't encourage Ahmed to look for tools and strategies for getting what he needed. In this way, Ahmed continued to be guided and was thus prevented from facing the consequences of his actions (forgetfulness, putting things off).

### **Prioritising Autonomy**

After talking to the social workers, the practitioner realised that Ahmed's behaviour brings out the tendency of others around him to do things for him, just as he himself had experienced. At this point, he found it necessary to find a way for Ahmed to self-regulate and require less external help to honour his commitments.

The lack of initiative also came out in household chores: Ahmed performed work that was asked for explicitly and in detail, but was not able to see for himself what could be useful and put it into practice when the request was more generic. This could prove problematic in the workplace, so it became a topic during sessions with the practitioner. Cristina tried to show Ahmed the communicative tools available to him he could use to help him understand others' expectations of him and work on examples reported by him and proposing simulated role plays.

In subsequent meetings with the social worker and the family, the commitments that Ahmed had made were verified one at a time, in detail and highlighting what went right and what did not until, after a couple of months, the verification was entirely positive and all concrete commitments were completed.

In the meantime, the employment contract was renewed for one year, raising hopes for further renewal later. It was time to start looking for a place to live.

As with the job search, the guidance practitioner supported Ahmed in finding accommodation. In this case, he decided to have Ahmed do it entirely himself, even at the cost of lengthening the time it would take. Before starting they agreed on a deadline for signing a lease. He gave himself a month's time.

The guidance practitioner helped him create a written plan with concrete steps to identify an appropriate living space, including aspects to be evaluated according to his needs (cost, location, size, roommates, furnishings) and sources for advertisements (websites, newspapers, agencies, word of mouth). Together they identified the characteristics of his ideal home, taking care to allow Ahmed to do the legwork. The practitioner acted only as a catalyst for the process even though it was difficult to keep from making suggestions. From one week to the next, they set a goal of visiting 5 housing solutions.

### **First positive results**

This time, compared to the initial job search, Ahmed seemed more ready. The impression was that he had acquired an effective method for searching and analysing and that the autonomous choice of deciding what was right for him motivated him. This time, he knew what to do and managed to stay punctual. At the next meeting, he shared his search results and evaluated them with the guidance practitioner. From the 5 proposals, they selected the most suitable choice and took another week to visit 5 more alternatives.

At the third meeting they made a final assessment and Ahmed chose the final solution, an apartment in the city shared with two other young workers. He agreed to complete arrangements with the owner in order to sign the contract within the next two weeks. As for setting up the new apartment and moving, Ahmed was helped by his host family. Together they decided what was necessary for him to be able to have his siblings visit him in the new home, being careful to allow Ahmed take the lead.

He and the guidance practitioner agreed on a new deadline for moving (in a month). They talked once every two weeks to see how things were going. At the deadline, Ahmed was not yet ready, due to delivery delays for furniture and other purchases that he postponed, but a few days later he finally moved into his apartment.

Ahmed had a couple more meetings with the guidance practitioner to help manage living with roommates and without the support of the family-case worker, who is still available for any logistical needs and advice.

### Follow-up

Three months later, Ahmed is still working at the factory and is satisfied with his housing and the relationship with his roommates. His siblings come to see him every two weeks and his mother also started visiting him every now and then.

His next goal is to find a job with better hours in an area of greater interest to him. He says he will deal with it when he feels stable enough. At that point, he may turn again to the guidance practitioner to explore his possibilities.

### From Cristina's point of view

At the end of the consulting period, which lasted about 12 months, Cristina felt that she had achieved the goals she had set herself with Ahmed and that she had responded to his request. The reference theory of growth mentality vs fixed mentality was useful as a guide and stimulated her to constantly monitor her operational choices and work strategies with Ahmed. In this way he was able to follow a precise plan and avoid having to improvise in counselling. To do this it was often necessary to work on herself and her own mentality: in fact, at times, she was tempted to think that Ahmed's modalities did not have great potential for change, and risked slipping into the entire theory. On the other hand, continuing to work "as if" the necessary skills could be acquired helped her provide this young person with the autonomy necessary to obtain them.

### Bibliography

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## Questions, Comments and Topics of Discussion

- What else would you have done in Cristina's place?
- When was it necessary for Cristina to rethink her role and mentality?
- What are the methods Cristina used to encourage Ahmed's "growth mentality"?
- What else would you have done to encourage Ahmed's "growth mindset"?

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