Disruptions and continuities in young people's transitions from foster care to adulthood

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Abstract

The aim of this article is to report on how young people in foster care experience continuities and/or disruptions during their transition to adulthood. The paper is based on the findings of a PhD thesis within the research project 'Young people's Transitions out of Residential and Foster Care – TransCare' at the University of Luxembourg adopting a qualitative, longitudinal approach for data collection. The results of semi-structured interviews with six young people transitioning from foster care to adulthood will be presented. Combining an understanding of identity as an ongoing process aiming at the reconciliation between inner and outer exigencies which can be quite contradictory and a relational-transactional perspective of agency, we will reconstruct how young people shape their transitions from foster care to adulthood. The results show how continuities and/or disruptions impact young people's identity formation and can be linked to specific forms of agency influencing the young people's pathways and decisions during their transition to adulthood. We will discuss in which situations continuities and disruptions can be seen as supporting or hindering factors during the transition to adulthood.

Keywords: Foster care, transitions, narrative identity, leaving care, agency

Introduction

This article is based on selected results of a PhD study[1] examining young people's transitions from foster care to adulthood in Luxembourg from a qualitative, longitudinal perspective. The doctoral thesis is part of the research project 'Young people's Transitions out of Residential and Foster Care – TransCare'[2] at the University of Luxembourg, focusing on young people's transitions out of residential and foster care. The overall aim of the study is the reconstruction of the young foster care leaver's narrative identity and agency during their transition to adulthood. In this article we will reflect on how continuities and disruptions the young foster care leavers experience during their out-of-home placement are linked to the process of narrative identity and agency construction and shape their transitions to adulthood.

In a first step, the theoretical and methodological frame of the study will be presented. Then we will give an overview of the legal context of the usual end of foster care within the Luxembourgish care system. In a third step, three different cases of young people transitioning to adulthood will be reconstructed. We will see that the transition to adulthood can challenge continuity within the relationships of the young

people (case 1) and that disruption can become one of the young people's strategies to strengthen the stability and to restore continuity within their relationships during their transition (case 2). Furthermore, the transition can bear the chance of a better future without disruptions for the young adults (case 3). In the conclusion, the findings will be discussed against the backdrop of the regulations of the youth welfare system in Luxembourg.

Theoretical and methodological frame

In research, young people ageing out of care are considered to be a vulnerable group, confronted with poorer outcomes in most life domains in comparison to peers of the same age (Berzin, Rhodes, & Curtis, 2011; Cashmore & Paxman, 2006; Courtney & Dworsky, 2006; Dworsky & Courtney, 2010; Hook & Courtney, 2011; Naccarato, Brophy, & Courtney, 2010; Pecora et al., 2006; Reilly, 2003). As research indicates, placement instability and disruptions have a negative impact on outcome dimensions like education, employment, housing, relationships, sense of identity and well-being, whilst stable placements enable continuity in relationships, a predictor for better outcomes after care (Cashmore & Paxman, 2006; Marsh & Peel, 1999; Pecora et al., 2006; Stein, 2005; Stott, 2012; Stott & Gustavsson, 2010). Although placement instability is not uniformly defined in research, most of the studies refer to placement instability in cases where young people experienced more than three placement changes (Petrat & Van Santen, 2010). In addition to this quantitative approach, the growing body of qualitative research emphasises the

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2   The research project TransCare has been funded by the Luxembourgish 'Fonds National de la Recherche' (2015–2019; funding number: C14/SC/7837180/TransCare/Karl). Project members: Prof. Dr. Andreas Hadjar, Prof. Dr. Ute Karl, Ass. Prof. Dr. Ulla Peters, Dr. Sabrina Göbel, Anna-Marie Herdtle, Julia Jäger, Marei Lunz.

perspective of the young people and reveals the complexity of continuities and disruptions, which can manifest both opportunities and risks for the young people (Biehal, 2014; Cunningham & Diversi, 2013; Del Quest, Fullerton, Geenen, & Powers, 2012; Refaeli, Mangold, Zeira, & Köngeter, 2017; Reimer & Schäfer, 2015; Skoog, Nygren, & Khoo, 2015). In this article, we will explore how continuities and disruptions impact young foster care leavers' narrative identity and agency during their transitions to adulthood.

Following Welzer (1993), transitions are seen as social processes, involving spatial and relational transformations in the life course and re-organisations within social relations, habits, routines of acting, and meaning making. Within the transition process, people are confronted with unclear expectations emphasising the importance of coping with and adapting to new situations. Therefore, transitions become particularly interesting when researching narrative identity and agency constructions: individuals have to cope with the emerging discontinuities during their transitions, and it can be reconstructed how self-concept and external expectations interrelate and contain certain scopes of action (Welzer, 1993). Thus, also the historical situation must be considered when researching transitions, including institutional frames, social policy, and the welfare state. Walther (2006) differentiates between different *transition regimes*, linking transition practices to their socio-economical, institutional, and cultural frameworks, and prevailing concepts of youth. These transition regimes impact young people's biographical constructions and their "subjective experiences of choice, flexibility and security in their transitions to work and adulthood"

(Walther, 2006, p.135). Walther (2006) points out that transitions have increasingly become de-standardised, reversible, and fragmented in Europe. Young people have to take more individual and isolated decisions and the responsibility for a successful transition is passed on to them. Therefore, individual subjectivities – defined as "the motivation to take one decision or another" (ibid., p.122) – become fundamentally important for social integration, raising the question if and how scopes of choice and action are given or restricted within trajectories, and thus, how structure and agency are interwoven.

Concerning the transition to adulthood, Arnett (2000) conceptualises this specific process as a distinct developmental period between adolescence and adulthood, the so-called *emerging adulthood*. During this period between the ages of 18 and 26, young people explore and discover their identity, often not identifying as adults until their thirties (Arnett, 2004). For young people transitioning to adulthood, this has led to an increased importance of support from parents or other adults for a successful transition to adulthood (Schoeni & Ross, 2005). In contrast, young people ageing out of care often experience their transition as "both accelerated and compressed" (Biehal & Wade, 1996, p.443), lacking emotional and social support, preventing them from the possibility of identity exploration and delaying their identity formation (Fowler, Toro, & Miles, 2011; Goodkind, Schelbe, & Shook, 2011; Jones, 2014; Kools, 1997, 1999).

Referring to Bridges (2002), Skehill and Dima (2011) point out the contradictions between social and psychological transitions, that young care leavers experience as parallel and interconnected processes tak-

ing place at different paces. Bridges (2002) distinguishes between 'change', which is linked to the external situation, and 'transition', which is linked to people's the internal needs. He states that external change should not happen before the internal transition has taken place, indicating that the internal needs of a person should not be dominated by fast changes of the surroundings (Bridges, 2002). Accordingly, Skehill and Dima (2011) identify an "in-between-zone" (ibid., p.2536) after the end of care, which the young people need for personal development, reconciling external expectations and exigencies, and their internal (psychological) needs after leaving care. Especially the change of role and identity from a 'care identity' to a 'normal' identity is a major challenge young people have to cope with after the end of care (Skehill & Dima, 2011). For instance, Fransson and Storø (2011) show how young care leavers actively cope with the weight of their past during their transitions to adulthood, adopting different strategies to leave their past behind and thus shaping their transitions in specific ways (Fransson & Storø, 2011). Furthermore, Ward (2011) argues that care leavers, whose life is characterized by discontinuity and transience, may have difficulties in developing a sense of their own continuity and therefore a sense of identity, stressing that further research on this topic is needed.

Referring to the social psychologist Heiner Keupp (Keupp et al., 1999), within this study *identity* is conceptualised as an ongoing coping process aiming at the reconciliation between inner and outer exigencies, which can be quite contradictory. Through autobiographical narrations, which are seen as social negotiation processes, people construct their self-perception and explain their development. "One can see them as a linguistic tool, which is constructed and used by individuals in relation, to support, to advance or to constrain different actions." [3] (Keupp et al., 1999, p.208). According to this, in this study, narrative identity construction is seen as a social practice and is empirically reconstructed through the concept of *positioning* as suggested by Lucius-Hoene and Deppermann (2004a, 2004b). They define processes of positioning as "discursive practices through which people mutually construct and constitute themselves and others as persons through verbal interactions" [4] (ibid., 2004b, p.168). Four different levels of positioning can be considered in the analyses: (1) how the narrated persons position themselves and others within the narrated events; (2) How the narrator is positioning him/herself and others within the narration; (3) how the narrator positions him/herself through the positioning of the narrated self and other persons within the narration; (4) positioning between the narrator and the listener (cf. ibid.).

One major aspect of the construction of narrative identities is *agency*, which explores the question of "how the narrator

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3 Translation by author: "Man kann sie als ein linguistisches Werkzeug betrachten, das von Individuen in Beziehung konstruiert und verwendet wird, um verschiedene Handlungen zu stützen, voranzutreiben oder zu behindern." (Keupp et al., 1999, p.208).

4 Translation by author: "diskursive Praktiken, mit denen Menschen sich selbst und andere in sprachlichen Interaktionen aufeinander bezogen als Personen her- und darstellen" (Lucius-Hoene & Deppermann, 2004b, p.168).

linguistically constructs opportunities and initiatives for actions (agency) in regard of the events of his/her life" [5] (Lucius-Hoene & Deppermann, 2004a, p.59). Therefore, agency is not conceptualised as a capacity or a competence of an individual pursuing goals and making rational decisions. Embedded into the process of identity construction, agency is seen as an accomplishment of people in interaction with their social context (Biesta & Tedder, 2006), influenced by their past experiences, present exigencies, and their aspirations towards the future (Emirbayer & Mische, 1998). In her micro-linguistic approach to agency, adapted in this study for the reconstruction of agency, Lucius-Hoene (2012) differentiates three levels of analyses: (1) On a first level, it must be reconstructed how predicates and linked semantic roles appear within the narration, providing insight on who is the agent and who is the object of action. (2) On a second level, the interaction between the narrator and the listener must be considered through the negotiation of the roles within the interview, which are often found within the opening sequences of interviews. (3) On a third level, the focus is on the question of how the narration can be seen as a coping strategy with respect to the narrated events. Although the events of a life story cannot be undone, they can be narrated in a self-worthy and forward-looking way, becoming a coping strategy (cf. ibid.).

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5   Translation by author: "wie der Erzähler Handlungsmöglichkeiten und Handlungsinitiative (agency) im Hinblick auf die Ereignisse seines Lebens linguistisch konstruiert" (ibid. 2004a, p. 59).

Following these strategies of analyses, the reconstruction of the narrative identity and agency of the young foster care leavers becomes possible. This allows us to show how they cope with exigencies emerging during their transition to adulthood on the backdrop of their life stories.

The end of care in the Luxembourgish welfare system

The laws and regulations that determine the end of care in Luxembourg were passed between 2008 and 2015 and are therefore quite recent. They also introduced the Luxembourgish youth welfare office (Office National de l'Enfance; ONE) as a new actor within the care system in general, but also specifically for the regulation and supervision of the end of care. In 2013, the 'Circular number 10' introduced the so-called 'projet d'autonomisation' (i.e. autonomisation project) for young adults transitioning out of residential or foster care. This regulation specifies the age of 18 as the moment for the end of care. This is reified by the 'projet d'autonomisation', a form used by the youth welfare office. One month before an adolescent's 18th birthday, young people in out-of-home care are asked to complete the form and to provide information about their personal history, their health status, their degree of autonomy, and their 'projet de vie' (i.e. life project). They can request the help of their social workers or foster parents to complete this form. Next, they are interviewed at the youth welfare office by an employee, generally unknown to them, who discusses the adolescent's 'autonomisation project' with the young person. Afterwards, the youth welfare office determines whether further financial sup-

port will be provided to the young person. In general, however, foster care support is extended until the age of 21, and the young people can either remain with their foster families (if they agree) or move to assisted housing until they reach this age. Due to these regulations, attaining majority can become a crucial moment within young people's transition to adulthood living in foster care: the question whether to stay with the foster family or not must be answered and eventually new housing and living solutions must be found.

Method

The data of the study reported here have been collected through semi-structured interviews with seven young people in foster care. In order to reconstruct the process of transition, a qualitative, longitudinal approach is adopted. Therefore, the semi-structured interviews with the young people are conducted at three different times during the transition: six months before, shortly after, and nine months after the end of care and/or when the young people prepare to leave their foster families. The questions within the interview guide were thematically focused on the following topics: the young people's present situation during their transition to adulthood (housing situation, schooling or job situations, friends, family etc.); their retrospective view on former experiences of change in their life with emphasis on their placement experience; their subjective well-being during the transition; and their projective perspective on their transition (what do they imagine for their future). The open questions were asked in a narrative-generating

way, giving the young people the possibility to tell their story and to set their own focuses on what matters to them during their transition to adulthood.

Starting the PhD project, the field entrance turned out to be quite difficult, which can probably be explained by two main reasons. First, Luxembourg is a small country and foster families and young people in foster care might fear that their anonymity cannot sufficiently be protected when telling their very personal stories, even though the researcher is taking every precaution by changing names, places and every information which might reveal the identity of the interview partners or any person mentioned within the interviews. Second, as described above, there have been several legislative and structural changes within the foster care system in Luxembourg over the last years, leading to a more constant and closer contact between the three Luxembourgish foster care services[6] and the foster families and foster children. This has led to reluctance among many foster families, often experiencing these changes as control over and intrusion into their private family life. Thus, some of them might be hesitating to participate in a research project, not wanting anyone else intruding into their family life.

In order to find participants for the study, in a first step, the author contacted different actors within the Luxembourgish foster care system, like the representatives of the three foster care services and the youth welfare office, social workers, and the Luxembourgish foster family association FLEK asbl, giving information on the

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6   Arcus asbl; Croix-Rouge Luxembourgoise; Fondation Lëtzebuerger Kannerduerf.

research project 'TransCare' and the PhD project. In a second step, information on the project and a call for participation were published in different Luxembourgish newsletters and on the internet. In a third step, the researcher presented the PhD project and the interview guide at team meetings of the foster care services. Finally, it was only with the support of the foster care services and the practitioners working there, that contact with foster families and/or young people in foster care could be established. After contact by phone, a first appointment was made with the young people. This first personal meeting gave the young people (sometimes their foster parents were also present) the possibility to get to know the researcher and all the details about the project and data protection. In case the young people decided to take part in the study, a second meeting for the first interview was made. The interviews were mostly conducted at the foster parents' home, one interview at a room of the University of Luxembourg, and one interview at a public place chosen by the young person.

There are no accessible official numbers on foster care leavers in Luxembourg. Unofficial estimations indicate that there are only around 10 to 15 young foster care leavers per year in Luxembourg. In order to guarantee the anonymity of the young participants, their biological and foster families, and the social workers, the PhD researcher had to take strict precautions regarding the data protection: as little information as possible is given on the individual biography or situation or exact age of the young people when presenting the cases.

On a general level, the sample can be described as follows. At the time of the first wave of interviews, the young people were aged between 17 and 20. There are six girls and one boy taking part in the study. Six of the young people were placed by the judge due to negligence and/or physical/sexual/psychological violence and/or substance abuse and/or psychological illness within the biological family. Six of the young people came into their foster families at a very young age, neither remembering the time in their biological families nor the placement, or only having unclear memories about this period in their life. One of the participants came into foster care during adolescence, not wanting to give any information on the reasons for placement. Six of the young people experienced continuity within their foster families, being in long-term foster care placements. Only one participant experienced changes and disruptions during the placement.

As the data presented in this article are the results of an ongoing PhD project, only the first wave interviews were conducted with all the seven young people from the sample when this article was written. Only with one young person, the second interview was already completed. Therefore, the focus is on the results from the first wave interviews, and only in 'case 2' the data from the second wave interview are included. Furthermore, only six cases are presented within this article, as one of the interviews was not yet transcribed when the article was written.

Subsequently, we will see three different transition cases derived from six first wave interviews and one second wave interview. When reconstructing the young people's narrative identity, it became clear that one major reference point in their identity construction is how they position their foster parents and biological parents. Therefore, we will focus on the positioning of the young people regarding their foster and

biological parents, and how continuities and/or disruptions emerged within these relationships. In doing so, on the one hand, we will point out how narrative identity and agency constructions emerge through specific positioning constellations. On the other hand, we will show how continuities and disruptions impact this process, manifesting specific exigencies and scopes of action and thus shaping the young people's transition to adulthood.

Results

Case 1 – the transition as a challenge to the continuity in relationships

The first transition case includes results from the interviews with four young people whose narrative identity and agency constructions, and exigencies at the end of care appear to be quite similar. These young people have been in long-time foster care placements and did not experience any placement disruptions during this time. They also maintained contact with their biological families or specific members of their biological families on a regular basis[7].

The reconstruction of their narrative identity reveals that they position their foster parents as their parents, often calling them 'mother' and 'father'. They consider themselves to be part of their foster family and position their foster family as their family in contrast to their biological family.

'Well, actually, it was for me like in my own family. Well, I felt better in the foster family than with my biological mother. It felt much more like family.[8]' (Denise[9])

In their narrations, they describe how their foster parents also positioned them as their children, underlining the mutual agreement and reciprocal understanding of being a family.

'Um, yes, well, my foster mother/ I have always seen her as a mother. For saying, it was, well, she also/ she also, when introducing us, she never said: "These are my foster children.", but: "These are my children."' (Fanny)

They describe their foster parents as responsible and reliable persons, where they experience continuity and support, when they feel confronted with challenges.

'Yes, my foster parents, yes, they support me almost everywhere, where it is possible.' (Bea)

The young people underline that their biological parents accept them as being part of the foster family, demonstrating that there is not a competitive situation between the foster and biological parents, which is contributing to a stable and secure family network surrounding the young people.

'Yes, I think there was a time when he [the biological father] *wanted to have us back.*

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7   Usually, a two-week visiting right on weekends.

8   All citations from the interviews have been translated from German or Luxembourgish to English by the author.

9   All names and places have been anonymised.

But he didn't do it because he said: "They have their lives here." And we can see him whenever we want to. [...] *Even though he said that we could come and live with him, I said, I wouldn't come. And he also understood that, because he knew that my friends and everything is there. He respects this opinion.'* (Gitty)

The reconstruction of their agency attributions shows that the young people position themselves and their foster parents as a collective, resolving problems and challenges together. Therefore, their agency is closely linked to that of their foster parents, and this can strengthen, expand, and substitute their scopes of action, depending on their specific needs in the situation.

'...that I was crying a lot at that time [when she started asking about the reasons for her placement]. *This is why my foster parents said: "Okay, yes, then we will see, that we do that* [the biographical research] *now!"'* (Bea)

For these young people, the transition to adulthood relates to two exigencies: first, the fear of having to leave their foster parents due to reaching the legal end of care, which can be described as an external exigency.

'There is fear like: "Can I stay there even though I am 18 or how does she [the foster mother] *see me now?" It's just difficult. The fears are coming.* [...] *And, um, of course I talked about it with my foster mother and she told me: "Well, no, you are my child and if you still want to live here at 30, then you can stay until 30, no matter if there is money or not." Well, like: "If/ if I don't get any money or not. You will still be*

my child." (.) Exactly. (.) That means confidence, yes. Security again, yes.' (Fanny)

And second, the wish to come to terms with their past through biographical research and the exploration of the exact reasons why they were placed in foster care, which is a more internal exigency.

'And then the story [how she came into foster care] *ends. He* [the biological father] *didn't tell me more. Then I will wait until I am 18, and then I will ask again, even though I will have to contact my* [biological] *mother. I want to know exactly why we had to go to care, although my mother still has four other children.'* (Gitty)

Therefore, during their transition to adulthood, these young people have to cope with external exigencies, due to the legal regulations, and internal exigencies, due to their life story. On the one hand, the legal end of care represents a potential threat to their relationship with their foster parents, who have become important attachment and identification figures. Therefore, they long for a reinforcement of this relationship which goes far beyond the legal regulations of the foster care system, in order to maintain security and continuity in their relationship. On the other hand, their wish to clarify their past through biographical research might result in reorganisations within the described positioning. It could provoke the reinforcement or weakening of the relationship with the biological family and, therefore, also impact the relationship with their foster families.

In summary, during the transition of these four young people to adulthood, the stable relationships and continuity they have experienced so far within their foster

families, are challenged through external and internal exigencies. Especially for the young adults whose narrative identity and agency constructions are closely linked to these relationships, coping with the reorganisation of these positionings becomes one major exigency during their transition to adulthood and must be observed within the subsequent interviews.

Case 2 – adoption during the transition; strengthening stability and continuity in relationships

In the second transition case, the young woman Mia has also been in a long-term foster care placement. Thus, in the interview she refers to two events during her placement which threatened the continuity and stability of her relationship with her foster carers from her perspective. Mia was placed in her foster family when she was only a few months old. Even though the foster parents were granted custody, her biological family upheld the two-week visiting right. In the interview, Mia explains that she never wanted to go to the visits and was afraid of meeting her biological mother, to whom she did not feel any type of attachment. Therefore, at around age 14, she made a legal request not to be obligated to see her biological family anymore. Mia's request was granted by the court, but her mother appealed the decision, which led to second judicial hearings. The court ruled again in favour of Mia's request, leading to the complete disruption of her relationship with her biological family.

In Mia's narration, these two court proceedings appear to be critical life events associated with intense feelings, which are still weighing on her. They impact her nar-

rative identity construction which is mainly based on the rejection of and the disassociation of herself from her biological mother.

'And yes, yes, and I am very ambitious. Because I don't want to become like my biological mother.' (Mia, Interview 1)

Even though the custody battle led to the severance of ties with the biological family, Mia does not feel like a legitimate part of the foster family, blaming her biological mother for this.

'Yes, and my biological mother really would not exist anymore. She would just be gone. Just as if she had never existed. And I would be the biological daughter of my foster parents.' (Mia, Interview 1)

In comparison to the other young persons in long-term placement, she does not construct her agency as being linked to that of her foster parents. For instance, during the custody battle, the young woman describes having to cope with the situation on her own. She does not mention if she had any support from her foster family or from social workers during the trial.

'Well, I was questioned by the judge, if I wanted to see her [the biological mother] *and they asked me all the time if I was sure that I did not want to see her anymore. If I really don't want any contact to her anymore. So, I always confirmed that I just don't want to see her anymore!* [...] *And then I had to go through this* [the court proceedings] *again."* (Mia, Interview 1)

At the same time, Mia positions the court as a powerful actor. The court not only legitimises the separation from her biological

mother and therefore regulates her relationships, but also restores her well-being.

> *'And I am happy that the court decided that I do not have to see her* [the biological mother] *anymore. Because I always felt very uncomfortable when I was next to her.'* (Mia, Interview 1)

During her transition to adulthood, Mia is still confronted with the challenge to legitimise the separation from her biological family and to secure and legitimise her place within the foster family to create stability and continuity. Therefore, after the end of care, Mia wants to be adopted by her foster parents, although she could stay with them anyway.

> *'And when I am 21 I will be adopted. Then I will have nothing to do with them* [the biological family] *anymore. […] I feel better like that, because then I can come to terms with my past.'* (Mia, Interview 2)

On the backdrop of her past experience of the judicial system regulating her relationships, it can be explained why the legal regulation of her situation is so important for Mia. She sees her chance to leave her unsecure past behind through the final disruption with her biological family in the form of the adoption. An important aspect to examine in the third interview during Mia's transition to adulthood is whether the adoption will provide her with this security in the future.

Case 3 – the transition to a better future – leaving disruptions behind

In the third transition case, the young man Emil came into foster care at around the age of 14, and states that he decided to leave his parents with whom he is not in contact anymore. He then experienced two disruptions of foster care placements due to personal challenges of the foster carers, which made it impossible for them to continue the care. Nonetheless, he does not describe these disruptions as critical or emotional life events, but as difficult circumstances regarding his housing situation that he dealt with and successfully resolved. At the time of the interview he just moved to assisted housing and was going to sit for his A-levels in a few weeks.

Examining his narrative identity, Emil does not position any attachment figures within his narration and does not give any details about his emotional relationships in the past, neither regarding his biological family nor his foster families, friends or social workers. Instead, he frequently refers to his self-concept of being a successful pupil at school and the better future he is working for.

> *'Okay, my name is Emil, I am* [number] *years old, born on* [birth date] *and I am a pupil at the high school, in the graduating class.'* (Emil)

Accordingly, his agency construction is mainly based on his self-concept, taking his life into his own hands, coping with the disruptions on his own, only asking advice from professionals such as his social workers or his teachers. Nonetheless, he does not describe them as attachment figures, but positions them as professional service

providers, thus underlining his self-concept of being self-reliant and self-determined.

> 'Then I went to the youth welfare office and I talked to an employee, and he made some suggestions where I could go now, and with my social worker I went to the head office of the foster care organisation, and then they suggested that I move to one of their apartments, well, to the assisted housing. And then I agreed to that and now I am here in this flat.' (Emil)

For Emil, the end of care also raises the wish to come to terms with his past. He sees the solution in a better future, which he links to having a job, being financially independent, and having his own family.

> 'Well, I just always imagined to become a [profession] and that was my greatest goal and I told myself: "Yes, one day it's going to be better." (…) And yes, I will start studying soon and then it's also going to be better.' (Emil)

In comparison to the other foster children in long-term placement, the repeated disruptions and the lack of attachment figures may explain Emil's orientation towards a better future, which is characterised by continuity for him. Therefore, during his transition to adulthood, the realisation of his plans becomes particularly important. In the subsequent interviews, it must be observed how the young man will realise his goals for the future. If he is successful in his plans to go studying, there will be a disruption in his supporting network of teachers and social workers, who have helped him with his plans so far. It will be important to determine how he deals with this dis-

ruption and if the transition to adulthood bears the chance to find continuity for him.

Discussion

In summary, we can see that disruptions and continuities play a twofold role in the transition to adulthood of young foster care leavers. On the one hand, how young people experienced disruptions or continuities in their past impacts their identity and agency constructions, and causes specific exigencies at the end of care that need to be resolved during the transition to adulthood. On the other hand, the legal end of care itself is a moment when new disruptions can occur, and continuity needs to be restored. As we could demonstrate in case 1, the continuity young people experienced within their foster families has led to a very close and supportive relationship going beyond the legal regulations of the care system and influencing their identity and agency constructions. Nonetheless, this continuity is challenged by the end of care and the young people long for a stabilisation of this relationship.

Referring to the findings of Skehill and Dima (2011) and the theoretical approach of Keupp et al. (1999), it can be said that these young people are confronted with *internal and external exigencies* at the end of care they need to reconcile in order to preserve continuity within their relationships, and identity and agency constructions.

As illustrated in case 2, continuity in foster care placements is not necessarily linked to a feeling of stability and security for young people. Therefore, the end of care raises for the young person the question of *belonging*. One strategy to strengthen and

to legitimise the relationship with the foster carers even after the end of care can be an adoption, going along with a final, thus legal disruption with the biological family.

Further, as seen in case 3, the transition to adulthood can bear the chance for young people to *leave a life characterised by disruptions behind* and to construct their own lives in a way promising continuity and stability. These findings correspond to Fransson and Storø (2011), showing how young care leavers actively cope with their past during their transition to adulthood. Here we can see, that disruptions can become one strategy for young people in order to come to term with their past and to prepare for the future.

Although the small qualitative sample of this study does not allow any generalisations, the study contributes to a theoretically driven approach to leaving care, instead to a pure practical interest (Stein, 2006). Linking identity and agency constructions allows us to see that depending on personal life stories, continuities and disruptions might bear both risks and opportunities for the young people, going along with certain exigencies at the end of care and opening up certain scopes of action to them.

Additionally, the reconstruction of their narrative identity and agency allows us a better understanding of the way of shaping their transitions to adulthood. Therefore, in further research, the subjective perspective of the young people must be considered when researching continuities and disruptions in foster care and their patterns of transitions. Disruptions should not necessarily be defined as failure or be linked to behavioural problems, but can become a coping strategy for young people dealing with the weight of their past, which can bear the chance of a better future for them.

Finally, practitioners preparing foster children for the end of care should consider that this is a *crucial moment* for the young people, where past experiences lead to certain internal exigencies which might collide with external exigencies due to the end of care, requiring special attention and support. They should find a sensitive way in supporting the identity construction of the young people by supporting them to balance their position between their families. As we could see, this position is impacting their identity and agency constructions, resulting in specific self-concepts and behavioural patterns, which can impact their further life course and decisions. Nonetheless, the findings of this study also underline, how young care leavers, who are considered to be a vulnerable population within research, cope with their life stories and actively shape their ways into adulthood.

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