

‘WHERE TO GO?’ YOUNG PEOPLE’S EARLY DESTINATIONS WHEN LEAVING CARE

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Abstract: *Leaving care is a crucial event in the life of young people who have grown up in care for most of their life. This paper discusses the early destinations of care leavers and availability of social support through the lenses of both social policy provisions and individual experiences of young people. The findings reported are part of a larger mixed-methods study on a sample of 34 care leavers who had left care in one county of Romania. Interpretative phenomenological analysis was chosen for its potential to give voice and make sense of young people’s experiences. Findings show that young people experience high housing instability and insecurity, early destinations being usually short term solutions. Psychologically many experience leaving care as a second abandonment, by the state. The article concludes with some recommendations for leaving care policy and practice.*

Key words: *child care, transition, leaving care, early destinations, interpretative phenomenological analysis.*

1. Introduction

Young people leaving care are a group of youth at high risk of social exclusion which is acknowledged in both national and international literature and research. The analysis undertaken by Stein on the leaving care situation in 16 countries [18], including Romania [2] evidences care leavers’ material disadvantage and marginalisation despite variations within different countries. Poor outcomes are reported in all life areas, such as low educational attainment, unemployment, poverty, accommodation difficulties and homelessness, teenage pregnancy, unstable or absence of family relationships, mental health problems, and involvement in crime.

Apart from the general negative picture of care leaver’s outcomes compared to their peers growing up within a family, it is important to discuss the progress made by the Romanian child care system. Romania has undergone massive changes in the welfare state policy, economics and philosophy in the transition from a former communist state (until 1989), to an actual democratic state, member of the EU (since 2007). A study of Anghel and Beckett [1] looking at Romania’s transition and care leaver’s transition used Bridge’s [4] transition phases to explain how the childcare system and the country as a whole were within the neutral zone, in transit between the values, mentalities, structures, and practices developed during the communist era and those suggested by

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the Western community. The rapid and accelerated 'blind' change was creating conflict across actors and sectors (public and NGO), paralysis among practitioners, and a feeling of abandonment among children and young people [3]. During communism care leavers had a relatively secure and straightforward route outside care, being employed and housed. After 1989 followed a first decade of transition when care leavers were almost entirely forgotten and abandoned, while the state's efforts were directed towards institutionalised children. During the first *period of real reform*, 1997 – 2000, when the new protection system was born, emphasising decentralisation of the childcare system, leaving care was seen as the end of the state's responsibility (Foundation Children Romania, 1998) and young people were perceived as adults capable to look after themselves. The *de-institutionalization period* (2001-2004) marked by the closure of large, mammoth-type institutions, replaced with family-type placement centres [11], [15] offered much better living conditions. Care leavers' exclusion, needs and rights were finally acknowledged and they became one of the priority groups of the government program. Basic human rights were addressed in 2002 in the law on '*Prevention and Combating Social Exclusion*' (Law 116/ 2002), such as: a system of employment contracts ('*solidarity contracts*') and incentives for employers, financial support for acquiring accommodation covering the first rate of buying a house or a three-year rent, free access to health care and scholarships for continuing education.

The *alternative to institutionalization care system period* (2005-present) [15] begun with the second major childcare reform (2004 enacted 2005) which extended the state's duty post residential care up to two years on request, offering

financial resources and employment opportunities upon leaving care. The need for planning post-care integration was recognised and services for developing independent living skills were set up.

Although the current child care legislation, including provisions for young people leaving care, is a progressive one, fully integrating the UNCRC, implementation has been observed to be patchy [5], [3].

2. Research design

The research design used mixed methods consisting of a qualitative core component with a quantitative supplementary element. Purposive sampling was used to select 34 young people (23 males, 11 females) aged 20 - 25 years from one of the counties of Romania, discharged during the *de-institutionalization period* who had an experience of living independently of two to four years. The sampling criteria used were: primary criteria - period of discharge from care / period of living independently, placement centres (gendered), age of leaving care and education; secondary criteria - young parents, school abandonment, age of entering care; tertiary criteria - after care support. In depth semi-structured interviews were carried out and analysed by use of interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) [16]. The term '*interpretative phenomenological analysis*' signals the dual nature of the approach [16, p.264]: the phenomenological requirement to understand and '*give voice*', exploring the participant's inside view on the phenomenon under study, and the interpretative requirement to contextualise and '*make sense*' of these claims from a psychological perspective. The analysis made use of the NVivo7 programme due to the large number of research participants in comparison with most IPA studies, and

therefore huge amount of data for an in-depth qualitative analysis. To ensure validity, a verification step was used, as well as consultation with an external auditor with expertise in IPA. However, findings cannot be extended outside the researched sample.

For the purposes of this article the theme 'Social transition to independent living' will be presented in detail. For a full report of the IPA matrix see [8].

3. Voices of young people leaving care: Early destinations

The method of interpretative phenomenological analysis offers an 'insider's view' of leaving care, giving voice to young people and understanding their experiences. The theme 'Social transition to independent living' is described by the subordinate themes: 'Early destinations', 'Nobody cares anymore', 'Instability and insecurity'.

3.1. Early destinations

The existential question faced fearfully by young people at the edge of leaving care is 'Where to go?' as echoed in Maria's words: "Right, like I even knew where to go? I knew I had no place of my own...". Such concerns were shared by many other care leavers:

"And now, today we have to leave and we find a place in the the street... I don't know what we're gonna do."
(Dan)

Among care leavers early destinations were returning home or to members of the extended family, rented accommodation or work provided housing, NGOs, one statutory transition centre, discharge with no planned destination from the placement centre. Boarding schools were in some cases a 'first step' for living independently while still studying.

Returning 'home'

Few care leavers (6 out of 34) were discharged to return to their families, either parents or grandparents, which they had previous contact with. Exception is the experience of one young man who met his family for the first time when discharged and accompanied home by a social worker. Meeting his mother for the first time at age twenty one was highly emotional:

"So, when I saw her I started to cry the first time and she cried and then she said 'I am sorry that I gave you up'. I said 'Do not worry, I am not going to do anything to you'." (Florin)

His family was large and some of his thirteen step brothers and sisters were living home, in very poor and hard conditions:

"...that house was about to fall to pieces, no windows, there was some plastic in the windows, there was dirt there, on the floor there was a mess, there was a room, two rooms, one had a door, the other one didn't have any door" (Florin)

His discourse indicates mixed feelings:

"For me it was bad that they were not the conditions that I expect...when I saw the conditions I couldn't sleep at night and kept thinking of the (placement) home [...] It was such a joy, yeah, on the one hand, cause I could see my family." (Florin)

He stayed home for five days and began to look for employment. His mother helped him to be admitted as an unqualified worker at a private residential home where two of his brothers were institutionalised. The advantage was that he got a full package: work and accommodation, food, solving his primary needs.

Most young people returning home stayed for short periods. Another example is the case of Violeta, a young woman who was discharged for behavioural problems after intense conflicts with the centre

manager and other staff which culminated in reciprocal verbal and physical abuse. She was discharged from care and sent back home, stayed a short period with her mother and step-father first, moved to her father and ended up in an abusive relationship:

“When I left from here (centre) I went home and with my mother we argued very hard and I left to my dad... and see... I liked a man, he liked me, he was Hungarian, I was Hungarian and he took me to his home... he used to keep me locked as if he wanted to force me, he didn't really love me, so then I was blind, I saw how it is to be married, everything sucks” (Violeta)

After she escaped she lived with different partners and moved many times finding various housing alternatives.

There were two young women who remained with their families for a longer period. One tells her story of being discharged to live with her grandmother who was very poor, but agreed as they were closely attached and maintained good contact whilst she was in care: *“it was not the usual granddaughter-grandmother kind of relationship, but more like a friendship” (Cristina)*. She describes having difficulties in receiving her entitlements, having to make many phone-calls and visits to the ‘Direction’ (on her expenses) and being confronted with employees' indifference, delay and lack of understanding for her financial desperation.

“I got to her, I put my luggage down ... I did not say to her 'grandma' I've come to you, I have no money, either we live or die', I was afraid, I had to be strong for me and for her at the same time [...] it was very hard... the first weeks till they gave me that money (lump sum)... I could see my poor grandmother, going to borrow money,

don't ... just to eat from day to day.” (Cristina)

The case of Andra is that of a young woman accepted home by her mother and grandmother “with open arms”. Unfortunately, shortly after her return both became ill and she cared for them. Her grandmother died soon while her mother died one year later. She lost part of her family, but gained support from her brother working abroad and her older married sister and continued to live in her parents' apartment. It is exceptional for care leavers to inherit a home and have a stable place to live.

Work provided housing

A common housing destination were rooms provided together with employment, generally in the builders area for young men, facilitated by the centre or ‘Direction’. This was the case of a group of seven care leavers accommodated close to the work place in a builder's area outside the city in a rented room paid short-term by the ‘Direction’. David describes very bad living conditions, such as a very small room for a group of seven young people, some had to sleep on the floor or armchair, no electricity, no bathroom, only one sink where they washed themselves and their clothes after a full day of work on the building site. They were very upset about the conditions provided and the way they were left without any further support or monitoring: *“they just left us there, not even a call 'how are you guys, or...' (David)*.

In two weeks' time they had an incident: one of them forgot a burning candle overnight placed on top of the television which burned and the walls turned black. When the general manager of the ‘Direction’ came to the place to see the damages David reacted and got in conflict with her:

"If they had provided us with electricity such stuff would't have happened... and I said in front of her: 'if you really wanted to help us, I can understand, I cannot say, yes, we had a bed to sleep, but under these conditions you can't do anything, can't wash your clothes when you come home from work so sweaty, no bathroom to shower, what can you see in the room when the night comes...'; Why do I complain ? She gave me a slap, well I held my head down..."
(David)

From this point on they had to be on their own.

One young woman was discharged together with a care friend to work in a village where she was provided with housing from the employer. On the day she arrived there she decided she couldn't stay and contacted her boyfriend for whom she left during the same afternoon.

"They found directly, without asking me if I like or if I want to go [...] a day before I was told 'watch out 'cause tomorrow we have to go there (village name) [...] I didn't say anything, what could I have said." (Elena)

Shortly afterwards she get pregnant, but separated from her partner because of many conflicts, mostly because she was not accepted by his parents being 'from the centre'. She ended up in a mother - child unit where she could be accommodated for one year with her baby.

Rented accommodation

One of the most frequent housing alternative for care leavers are cheap rooms rented in block of flats previously designed for workers in factories (during communism). Care leavers were initially supported by the 'Direction' for two or three months after which they had to pay all expenses. A group of eight care leavers shared two rooms with facilities on the

corridor. Conflicts with care peers were common. Nelu shared his feelings experienced in the first days:

"I thought... see its 1 o'clock, we have lunch now (in the centre), the program was the program... now I kept thinking what to do... and I stayed in rented rooms and we all argued with the guys who were in charge of food, one of them took the food and was selling it for cigarettes" (Nelu)

After two months of 10-12 working hours per day and endless conflicts with his care peers he gave up and called the general manager as he had a good relation with her telling that *"I don't want to live there anymore, I'd rather go to the station as a homeless person"*. He was accepted to live for a period in a crisis intervention centre of the Child Protection Direction. Soon afterward his colleagues got into conflict with neighbours and had to leave the place. They were also accepted in the crisis intervention centre until other alternatives were found.

Two young people, Călin and Dragoș were lucky to be supported by foreign families for the house rent and had a good early start in life.

The crisis intervention centre

This centre was a short-term transition centre for children entering care in emergency placement until they were placed in a long term solution. Although it was not designed as an after-care support centre, it proved to be a good alternative as the first destination. Yet, only three young men (Mihnea, Anton, Rareș) had the opportunity to be transferred directly from the placement centre's they have lived to this centre, as they were employed in the area where the centre was located. Afterwards they were referred to different NGO programmes. Călin who left for university was also accommodated in this centre as it was the closest to the city

where he studied and he had to be maintained in care until finishing school.

Leaving without a destination

Few young people talked about having been discharged without any destination. They had the poorest start, having to deal with housing and job difficulties on their own from the very beginning. This was the case for those who were behaviourally difficult generating significant conflicts: drinking and causing damages in the centre, fights with others or even abusive towards the personnel:

“Some big guys... beat some teachers from there and the director came in and caught them all there in the room... he has beaten him, and him and such... and she said ‘boys you handle it from now on we cannot keep you anymore’ (Cătălin)

Mircea was considered to have a strong negative impact on other children in care and was discharged, even though he was still studying. He described himself as:

“I was an extremely aggressive person, very bad... and that’s why they kicked me out... I did a lot of things, that’s why it happened [...] the center kicked me out in the last school year and I had to work to continue my school, to pay the boarding, and I worked, I had to work ...” (Mircea)

Boarding school

Boarding school was perceived like a first step of transition toward independent living. Almost half of the interviewed care leavers studied vocational training or were at high-school away from the placement centre, in the city and lived for two up to four years in boarding schools, returning to the centre only during holidays. Many of them had seen the advantage of

developing some independent living skills for a smoother transition when finishing school and being discharged from care, on their own with everything.

“When I have left for (city name) I was, how to say, freer... I saw how it is to have a perspective upon life and how all the difficulties show up and so I could have more resources [...] before arriving at the boarding school I haven’t seen this in the centre which did everything for us, we had to just learn and go to school” (Ion)

Contrary to most, for Octavian, boarding school was considered to be the moment of leaving care:

“...except for the food that was being served at the canteen, you really had to manage on your own, wash your clothes, clean your place, take care of yourself, go to school” (Octavian)

Leaving care programmes (private sector)

In addition to the three young men transferred from the crisis intervention centre to the private sector and included in NGO programmes, other four girls were discharged directly at NGO’s receiving long-term comprehensive support. They had a good starting point in life and chances for a smoother transition and social integration.

3.2. ‘Nobody cares anymore’

Most young people’s subjective experience is of being abandoned once outside care, as Constantin’s words intensively express:

“Well there was no more help, nobody helped you, they (child protection) gave you those...the lump sum and then didn’t care for anyone, you did not have anyone to give you help, you had to follow your path, to

see your work... nobody cares anymore". (Constantin)

The same feeling was expressed by another young person talking about 'when I was left with nothing'. These words referred primarily to the loss of the resources addressing basic needs such as accommodation, food, clothes; however it symbolically communicates about all psychological losses care leavers experience in their transition from public care to independent living, such as friends, security etc. Elena felt frightened to leave care because "I knew I was going to be alone and I hate being left alone".

For many young people, leaving care is a transition from 'total support' to almost 'no support', most of them partially or totally losing the provisions and support received while in care. This is metaphorically expressed in Anton's words for whom the transition felt like moving from 'paradise to hell'.

"Yes, very hard, much harder...well in the centre we had everything for granted, I was not even thinking how it is. I just knew it's going to be hard when I get away from here as nobody will give us, nobody will provide 'at our foot': take it from here, that's your soup, that, that...". (Daniel)

It is common for young people with a care history to believe that "everything we deserve, someone has to do it, we didn't have to do, someone has to do it for us [...] now we start to get the picture..." (Dumitru). The abrupt leaving and confrontation with the world outside care was "harder from any perspective; much harder was exactly the contact [...] the impact, just when I had nothing left, when I had to look for, to start searching..." (Călin). Suddenly, after being discharged from care young people had to provide everything by themselves, lacking the material and financial

resources, and the skills needed to provide them and live independently.

"Growing up in the centre where I had a secure meal, accommodation, I mean all facilities were secured, I didn't have to struggle for absolutely anything... it was really hard to imagine how things would be [...] Till I wasn't in the present situation, having to pay and see how it's like to work and pay and be left with nothing". (Ion)

Another issue young people had to face once leaving care were differences in living conditions and standards inside and outside care, as they afford only poor and very poor housing, as evidenced before. They compared and valued the improved material conditions in residential care especially since the 'Direction' took over the coordination of the centres (1997).

"As we passed over to the Child Protection there were offered some better conditions and when you leave the children's home you think...if you do not have any support you think 'what am I going to do?...at least in the centre you had a TV, it was clean, everything washed... all of a sudden out of home and it hits you...very hard, especially for those who are going to leave because there are very good conditions and outside it fades out... I mean now that I passed and still pass through... but it's going to be very hard for them". (Vasile)

3.3. Instability and insecurity

Features of instability and insecurity can be observed in all core life areas of care leavers, such as housing, work, finances and relationships. As the purpose of this article is focused on young people's early destinations, housing instability will be given

particular attention, since it is the major area of insecurity.

One young man talked on behalf of the group of care leavers to illustrate the generality and severity of the problem:

*“That’s our problem, and it’s a home, that’s what it is, ‘cause we got **nowhere to stay**, and that’s what wears us out every day.” (Nicu)*

Many care leavers had times when they had no bed for one or more nights, or even weeks or months and experienced the fear of ‘you get to stay in the street in the end’ (Dan). In such crises situations the care peers network seemed to be their main salvage:

“He had nowhere to stay and now he was staying at our place, and we’re 3 blokes in all in that room so I’m sleeping with my mate... and he’s sleeping on the floor, on a mattress that we brought for him, which it isn’t natural for us two guys to sleep in the same bed, but we can’t do anything about it.” (Mircea)

Although some care leavers did not have such solutions when undergoing a crisis and experienced homelessness, sometimes in small groups, temporarily:

“Anyway, it was hard for me. One year, I remember I had to sleep together with my mates, till we found a place to rent in (name of area). We slept on a hill outside, that’s it; and it was raining and we weren’t in the home anymore. Where was I to go? And I talked to my mates and asked them: ‘Don’t you guys stay in a rented place?’ ‘Yeah, we’ve got a hotel’ and when I saw where they were staying, on the hill, I said ‘man, I can’t stay here’, but in the end I had no other choice. I stayed with them, there on the hill.” (Daniel)

Most young people have a history of multiple moves captured in Dragoş’s words “moving from one place to

another... like a traveller, no...”. They are condemned to a life of insecurity.

“It’s very hard to move every year, and rents are very expensive, very, and you can’t handle that.” (Constantin)

Paying rent on the liberal market is one of the highest financial burdens for care leavers. The intensity of hardship and stress is well-expressed in the words of Nicu:

“Well you know, rents and rents all over the place, I had to rent rooms like crazy, I dunno, I really don’t know now, it’s the last month I’m paying, and now that I don’t have a job anymore, I really don’t know, I honestly have no idea of what I’m to do... [...] This is the most, this is what stresses me out the most,” (Nicu)

Housing is close connected to work and finances, hence difficulties in these areas impact on housing: “Well, if I work in a place... whatever... and it is poorly paid and I can’t handle the food and a crib, then I can’t stay there.” (Florin)

There are various reasons for moving places, some dependent on the young person, such as financial difficulties, conflict with neighbours, owner or room-mates, while other uncontrollable, such as high renting costs, owner’s decision to end the ‘contract’ or end of social support from an institution or person.

Instability and insecurity are dominant features of the transition period, but experienced at different degrees by care leavers, some of them managing to reach some sort of stability in one or more life areas, which seems to be related in many cases by the support received (see Dima, 2010).

4. Housing statistics

A hierarchy of care leavers' needs for support in transition places housing by far on the first place. Statistical data on housing in the first year after leaving care in the case of the 34 young people of the researched sample showed that 61.8 per cent (21 care leavers) have moved five times or more, 17.6 per cent (6 care leavers) registered three to four moves, while only 20.6 per cent (7 care leavers) changed their living place once or not at all. When interviewed (at two to four years after discharge) almost half (15 young people) were living in the current accommodation for less than three months, while an equivalent number of young people had stable accommodation for more than one year. However, only 17.6 per cent (6 young people) stated that they could rely on the present housing solution for over six months.

The vast majority of care leavers do not live alone, 91.2 per cent, and over half of them stay in rented apartments with shared rooms and facilities. Only 8.8 per cent (3 young people) have complete privacy.

Within the researched sample over half of care leavers, 55.9 per cent (18 young people) benefited from *support* for *housing* which was provided mostly by statutory or voluntary organisations (14 young people). Few had support from family (3 young people), partner (2 young people), friends (3 young people) and employer (1 young person).

5. Discussions and conclusion

Housing is to a great extent the highest difficulty care leavers have to face once outside residential care and the priority need for support. A national study showed that over half of young people

had no housing alternative when approaching discharge [12]. Housing support from statutory agencies is very low for Romanian care leavers as the number of social apartments ensuring a more gradual transition is insufficient compared to the needs and mostly concentrated in the capital [13]. According to the National Authority, by 2006, young people were leaving care at a rate of approximately 2000 per year, while in 2006 a number of 467 social flats was reported (http://www.copii.ro/alte_categorii.html). As regards housing provisions care leavers are not able to benefit from the state's support in acquiring a home as they cannot qualify financially for the contribution they have to provide. Hence, the recommendation is to increase the number of social flats available at discharge, also outside the capital, and the efficacy of the services for developing independent living skills.

Nowadays, there is little documentation about state support after care and there is no tracking system after leaving care or comprehensive outcome studies. After 2006, this group appears to stop being a priority so that there are even less public follow up data available. It is recommended to collect data on care leavers early outcomes to be able to tailor after-care services according to their needs for support.

Within the voluntary sector NGO's leaving and after care programs try to compensate and support young people for a smoother transition to the world outside care. Among those the model of SOS Villages Romania offers extended support when leaving care, a well-planned and supervised transition (<http://www.sos-childrensvillages.org/where-we-help/europe/romania>). These are local or regional services, but there is no clear evidence of the existing after care services at national level. The

creation of a national network of leaving and after care services would offer opportunities for exchange of expertise and good practices and be a force to advocate and lobby for care leavers' needs for support. This would be another recommendation of the current study.

Another impediment for young people's social integration is that children's histories in care and contact with their living families, including siblings also in care were not preserved, making them 'social orphans' over time (only 4% had no biological families in 2000) [10]. Very few have returned home to live with family or extended family members and most for short periods of time, which is shown in other Romanian studies too [14]. Wade [21] clearly points that family ties are a key resource for young people wherever it is possible to maintain or re-create family or extended family links, yet it appears that social workers do underestimate the potential of these relationships. Even that family reunification is relatively uncommon in England too, in many cases young people could return home for overnights when in crisis. This study recommends that social workers become more aware and encourage children's formal and informal social links to develop a network capable to act as a resource when they leave care and need support.

It appears that one of the main resources outside care is the care peers network. Care leavers' tendency to group together after leaving care is documented by [20] as being the result of the society's rejection of care leavers and the care leavers' rejection of a society they are not prepared for. The social work practice to discharge young people in pair or small groups, noticed in this study, is further encouraged because it provides for them a sense of continuity and security during a time of increased instability.

Data evidences that highly salient markers of aftercare life are instability and insecurity, as opposed to stability and security. They experience multiple moves and few manage to have a stable place to live. In addition to lacking family roots and the inherent sense of security and belonging, care leavers face major challenges in getting physical roots, and a place to belong after leaving the residential home. For [19] being in settled, safe accommodation is an important landmark on young people's journey to adulthood.

Care leavers subjective experience of leaving care is often that of a second abandonment [22], [2] by the state for this time. Lacking a well-prepared discharge and an after-care support network, care leavers experience the gap between 'inside' and 'outside' care as a transition from almost total support to no support. Their losses are multiple, both material and relational [17].

An adaptation of Bridge's phases of transition [4] to leaving care done by Dima [7-8], points to the difference between the social and psychological transitions which cannot be accomplished in the same pace. Recommendations for social care policy and practice are to offer young people preparing to leave care extended support and a more gradual transition form care to independent living to ensure a smooth social transition and the time needed to psychologically adapt to the world outside care.

Acknowledgements

The present study was made possible with the financial support of Queens University as a PhD grant awarded to Gabriela Dima and supervised by Dr. Caroline Skehill and Professor John Pinkerton.

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