

Occupational Aspirations of Care Leavers and their Pathways to Work

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1 Introduction

In this article we examine the experiences of transitions to work and the associated challenges for the *agency* of young people leaving residential care institutions in Luxembourg. We understand *agency* from a relational perspective as always produced in changing social constellations depending on the contextual conditions. In particular, state financing of care beyond full legal age in Luxemburg is linked to being in school or pursuing vocational training. This limits the phases and opportunities for trial and error and accelerates quick transitions into work by means of policies. On the side of the actors *agency* shows up as opportunities for action and as ways of influencing the own life. Our aim is to look at the vocational aspirations, hopes and intentions of care leavers in regard to a vocation and/or gainful employment during and after their transition from residential care. During transition it is important who accompanies and supports them (Arnau-Sabatés & Gilligan, 2015; Hiley, 2014). On the other hand, our aim is to shed light on how these adolescents and young adults experience and perceive transition processes and how they describe themselves in changing constellations. Where are problems or helpful reference points in coping with transitions? What effects do these challenges and references have on the future life choices and lifestyles of care leavers in Luxembourg? To answer these questions, the empirical analysis draws from qualitative longitudinal interviews with young people who were in the process of leaving care at the time of the research, as well as from retrospective interviews with young adults who had already left the child and youth welfare system.¹ The inclusion of the two data sources makes it possible to gain insight into the unfolding transition processes and to take into account the experiences of care leavers from the perspective of a later point in their careers.

In our analysis, we distance ourselves from one-dimensional or linear concepts of transitions, which consider these processes only as individual achievements of the subjects. Following Harald Welzer (1993), we understand the process of leaving care to be one that is situational, dynamic, and not bound to one individual: “Transitions [are] – whether agent-led or not – always social processes in which more subjects than the individual transitioner are involved” (Welzer, 1993, p. 35, translation by the authors). This idea of transitions as processes in which various human actors and non-human actors are involved, or as something that is first

¹ The interviews were conducted as part of the research project “Young People’s Transitions out of Residential and Foster Care” (TransCare). The project is funded by the Luxembourgish Fonds National de la Recherche (2015–2018, C14/SC/7837180/TransCare/Karl/Peters). The longitudinal interviews were conducted as part of the dissertation “Agency in Transitions from Residential Care” by Marei Lunz.

generated when ‘subjects’ and ‘things’ come together in eventful ‘assemblages’ (Latour, 2012, p. 83ff.), is even more evident in the concept of ‘distributed agency’ (Folkers, 2013, p. 28). According to this concept, agency is always understood as an emergent quality of these temporary configurations as a whole, in which people are involved. Whereas agency should be understood in a decentred way, as “enactment” in “space-time-matter relations” (Barad, 2007, p. 178), and human capacity always arises in hybrid ‘assemblages’. The aim of this contribution, which proceeds from an understanding of ‘distributed agency’, is to identify and examine the (emergence of) occupational aspirations of care leavers as well as their pathways to work in changing constellations of transition and to explore the opportunity and enabling structures (e.g. in the form of compromises or encounters) that emerge in these transitional constellations as to which forms of ‘distributed agency’ are generated and become effective for young adults.

Because research on leaving care in Luxembourg is still in its infancy, the following section two will first take a comparative look at international research. In the last decade, a broad field of research with different priorities (e.g. needs, support or outcomes) has been established. However, care leavers’ transitions from school to work and their occupational goals – especially for Luxembourg – have not comprehensive been systematically examined. Proceeding from first international findings this article attempts to address this need for more research. The development of vocational aspirations and decisions regarding transitions to work are taken always within specific socio-political and legal frameworks. In section three we present previous research results concerning (labour market) structural developments in Luxembourg and the resulting conditions for the transition of young adults to working life, as well as the relevant legal framework for regulating the transition of young adults from residential care. Section four presents the overview of our methodological approach and section five the results of the qualitative analysis of the longitudinal and retrospective interviews on the vocational orientations and transitions into work among care leavers from residential care in Luxembourg. Drawing from our comparison of the different interview data, we identify and discuss implications for the design of care leavers’ transition processes and their transition into work. By way of conclusion, we raise the question of to what extent the proposed view enables the vocational aspirations of young people in transition and the associated processes of finding meaning and orientation to be beneficially linked with the actual practice of transitioning out of residential care. Moreover, professionals working in the field should consider in what ways a reflective awareness of the prevailing shifts and ‘distributed agency’ can positively influence the design and practice of transition (section six).

2 Research on leaving care and the professional aspirations of care leavers

A review of the current research landscape on leaving care points to the fact that leaving care often takes place alongside other transition processes (Göbel et al., 2019; Cheung & Heath, 1994; Stein, 1994). A sensitization in research to this fact can be achieved above all by taking advantage of the temporal overlap between the process of leaving care and the transition process from educational institutions into work. Yet, although transitions out of educational institutions are regarded as an important factor in the transition into an occupation, a research gap is evident. On the one hand, research on care leavers’ transitions out of educational institutions (especially in German-speaking countries) shows the relationship between educational aspirations, formal educational processes, and successful educational attainment,

as well as a successful transition from (residential) child and youth welfare.² The studies also established a positive influence on life and participation opportunities, income, labour market opportunities, and health (Zeller & Köngeter, 2012; Köngeter, Mangold, & Strahl, 2016; Mangold & Rein, 2014; Sievers, Thomas, & Zeller, 2015). On the other hand, there is a dearth of empirical research on the vocational/occupational aspirations of care leavers and their processes of transition into work. International research studies tend to focus mostly on the current status and work outcomes of care leavers in the labour market and formulate conclusions for the practice of social work based on their research (Dixon, 2008; Courtney & Dworsky, 2006). Only a few studies deal with the question of how the transition to the world of work takes place, which experiences young care leavers gain and which aspects positively support the process (Gilligan & Arnau-Sabatés, 2017; Arnau-Sabatés & Gilligan, 2015; Goyette 2019; Courtney 2019). Gilligan and Arnau (2017) stress the importance of a so called “work experience capital”, which means that a relation to work has been already achieved before the transition process, like in during an internship, and that young people can rely on these experiences. Goyette (2019) refers to the interplay between social capital and social networks, whereas Courtney (2019) shows the positive effects of an extended state care.

Overall, the international studies point out that young people from residential care often show little initiative to pursue a vocational aim and largely have no specific career ideas. At the same time, the distance to the professional world hinders their integration into the labour market (Kress, 2012; Abeona 2014-2016). Factors fostering successful integration into the labour market are education, financial support, and one’s social background, as well as a close relationship to professionals in the care environment and a reliable, extended private and professional support network (Zeira, Refaeli, & Benbenishty, 2019; Schumacher et al., 2015; Kress, 2012). Moreover, Kress (2012) has shown that care leavers most often choose a job because of the immediate financial security it promises rather than personal fulfilment.

Up to now, there has been no research on how care leavers develop their occupational or professional aspirations, how they shape their career paths, and which supportive and/or impeding factors become relevant in this process. The international research results nevertheless point – albeit not in a systematic or empirical way – to the high relevance of various aspects such as relationships with professionals and financial support, as well as to the central importance of educational aspirations and qualifications in the transition to an occupation (Zeller & Köngeter, 2012). In our empirical analysis, we would like to make the concept of ‘distributed agency’ compatible and develop it empirically with regard to the ‘assemblage’ of the above-mentioned factors for the transition into work. For this, we must first elucidate the specific structural conditions of the Luxembourgish context, which these ‘assemblages’ also generate.

3 Structural and legal conditions framing leaving care and transitions into work in Luxembourg

For Luxembourg, there are no available research results on the labour market situation of young people transitioning from care institutions. Nevertheless, the Youth Report from 2015 provides general data on the transition of young adults into the labour market. These results show that the youth unemployment rate is relatively high at 22 % of people under the age of 25. The unemployment rate of the population as a whole is 6 %, similar to the rate in

² Young people with experience of residential care generally have a lower degree of education, have a higher school dropout rate, and spend less time in vocational training than do their peers with a similar socioeconomic status (Köngeter, Mangold, & Strahl, 2016; Abeona, 2014-2016; Harder et al., 2011).

Germany; hence, in Luxembourg young people in particular face difficulties entering the labour market (Schumacher et al., 2015).

Moreover, in Luxembourg we also find a close relationship between educational qualifications and integration into the labour market. Even though the number of jobs is increasing because of steady economic growth, unemployment among young people is also increasing. This trend is in part due to a problem in matching the qualifications of young adults with the high qualification demands of the Luxembourg labour market. People with low levels of educational attainment have difficulties finding a job. Another factor for young people is competition from migrants and cross-border commuters who occupy some of the available jobs. In order to cope with the problem of low qualifications and difficult integration into the labour market, Luxembourg has implemented a number of education and training programmes as well as programmes preparing individuals for the labour market (e.g. Centre national de formation professionnelle continue [CNFPC], Insertion professionnelle divers métiers [IPDM], Luxembourg Lifelong Learning Center) (Schumacher et al., 2015). However, these offers for young adults who have difficulties transitioning into the labour market – so-called “transition with the need for support” or “failed transition” (Schumacher et al., 2015)³ – and who are not anchored in the education system (so-called NEETS, Not in Education, Employment or Training) are often out of reach (Joachim, Weis & Willems, 2018). National and international studies point to the restrictions on quality of life that ensue from an initially failed transition to work (Weis & Joachim, 2017; Ryter & Schaffner, 2015).⁴

The so-called income for social inclusion (Revenu d’inclusion sociale) is afforded as of the age of 25, which means young people who are unemployed have no financial support at all. Moreover, it is quite difficult for young people living on their own because of the increasing cost of housing (Schumacher et al., 2015, p. 39). In view of this problem, transitional support was introduced in 2011 (L’aide à l’enfance et à la famille, AEF),⁵ but a condition for this state support is an internship, training or employment.⁶ Hence, all young adults under the age of 25 who experience difficulties in integrating into the labour market and do not have any family support are left in a precarious life situation. Young people transitioning out of residential

³ A general typology of transitions into the labour market – which does not include the specific situation of care leavers – was presented in the Luxembourgish 2015 Youth Report. Different means of entering employment were identified: “straight transition” (people belonging to this group go straight from education into work), “alternative transition” (young people from this group faced several ups and downs in their transition from school to work and found creative ways to deal with these challenges), “transition with the need for support” (these young adults are struggling with integration into the labour market; they obtain support from the job centre or live in assisted housing), and “failed transition” (the category “failed” includes people who are in difficult life situations on numerous levels and who are not likely to enter the labour market soon) (Schumacher et al., 2015).

⁴ Employment for young people and young adults is also a central concern in politics: “The field of action ‘Réussir la transition entre l’école et le monde du travail’ – i.e. the successful transition from school to work – is an important component of the Luxembourg Youth Pact (MFI, 2012); the European Youth Guarantee (Le Gouvernement du Grand-Duché du Luxembourg, 2014) aims to ensure timely (re-)integration of young people under the age of 25, and the EU2020 strategy (European Commission, 2010) set educational targets for young people” (Schumacher et al., 2015, p. 71).

⁵ Through the reform, the youth welfare law (the so-called AEF) is now targeting young people between the ages of 18 and 27 (Article 3 (2), AEF) (Lunz & Jäger, 2018). After the age of 18, further support up to the age of 21 is dependent on the individual’s degree of autonomy.

⁶ All young adults from the age of 18 can apply for help in housing and financing, if they have a project (training, internship, employment) showing that they are trying to achieve educational aims or working experiences. It is the idea of “activation” linked to support.

care also face these challenges. Furthermore, it can be assumed that they are confronted with financial insecurity as well as difficulties in accessing the labour and housing markets. In the following sections, we examine how these conditions shape the care leavers occupational aspirations and transitions into work.

4 Methodological approach

The data used in our analysis was collected as part of the research project “Young People’s Transitions out of Residential and Foster Care” (TransCare) at the University of Luxembourg. For the first time, information on the situation of care leavers and their transition out of care has been systematically collected. In addition to a document analysis, interviews with professionals and a quantitative survey with young adults who lived three to seven years ago in residential or in foster care as well as a qualitative retrospective study with the same target group were conducted. Moreover, two qualitative longitudinal studies following young people on the age of majority as they transitioned out of residential and foster care were conducted. An informed consent was signed by the interviewees and the interviewers which contained the assurance of anonymity and a confidential use of the collected data. The selection criteria allow a focus on care leavers who had their transition after the legislative reforms in Luxembourg. This ensured the comparability of the data material.

In this article we look at young people aging out of residential care and we combine data from the longitudinal and the retrospective study. Foster care is not included in this analysis. Our sample comprises interviews with sixteen young people who were just in the process of leaving care: sixteen interviews were conducted six months before leaving care (t1), nine interviews just after they left the institution (t2), and nine interviews nine months after their move out of care (t3). For five interviewees, the topic of professional aspirations was made relevant in all phases of the leaving care process ($n = 5$ times t1, t2, t3). The qualitative retrospective study comprises sixteen interviews with people who lived in residential or foster care three to seven years ago. The eight interviews with the care leavers from residential care were used for the empirical analysis ($n = 8$). In all of these eight interviews occupational aspirations were mentioned and connected to the process of leaving care. We see changes in the young people’s processes of finding meaning and orientation in relation to the paths they have taken in their careers.

Relevant interview sequences for comparison between the two samples were chosen and a fine reconstruction was conducted. Selected interview examples illustrate the findings.

5 Results of the empirical analysis

In the transition from residential child and youth welfare, care leavers – insofar as they are still dependent on help – find themselves in a highly institutionally defined constellation that exerts pressure on the young adults in various ways, or that they experience as such. Within these constellations they are marked as care leavers, unlike their peers who grow up among family. Although other young people may also experience the transition into adulthood as exciting and even stressful, their family usually provides them with resources of some kind. A distinctive feature shared by young adults who grow up in residential care is that their paths into work are often connected to an intensive process of dealing with biographically formative experiences, and this process is linked to their care biography. For care leavers, there is little time or space to work through the past and the effects of these experiences on their current situation (Stein, 2008; Dima & Skehill, 2011).

With regard to their transition and further planning for the future, care leavers are expected – ideally when they start preparing to move out of their residential care institution – to know their (occupational) aims or to have developed concrete vocational aspirations. And yet, like other young people at this age, they are still in a phase of trial and error. The following findings show that care leavers deal differently with the demands of early vocational orientation, which can often be a source of pressure. The different approaches do not always lead to the expected clarity about their future career path. Our analysis shows how opportunity and enabling structures emerge within the transition constellations, whether they are recognized (e.g. perceived as supportive), and how these structures can become effective in the meaningful construction of care leavers' (occupational) biographies.

5.1 Implications of having occupational aspirations during transition

In the available data from the longitudinal interviews conducted at three different points in time, the interviewees never mentioned systematic forms of support that help care leavers to 'try out' their vocational aims. The significant difference to young people without care experiences is that they have nearly no trial periods, because they have no social network (e.g. family) that will support them when they fail. In addition, (financial) support for young care leavers such as housing etc. depends on being in school or vocational training. Uncertainties are directly linked to existential problems. These young people get support through the personal commitment of individual caregivers in the institutional context, who help them in concrete situations. A decisive variable in dealing with the experienced pressure seems to be the existence of a sufficiently contoured idea of the general direction in which young adults would like to orient themselves professionally. In the longitudinal interviews, a considerable difference emerged as to whether the care leavers have a vocational aspiration or a sufficiently contoured idea of a desired occupation or can develop an idea in the process of leaving care, or whether this direction is absent and they are in the process of searching. In the latter phase they accordingly require more time, support, and opportunities for orientation and experimentation.

With regard to the occupational aspirations of care leavers, the longitudinal interviews reveal a mostly bifurcated picture, which then becomes even more differentiated. Some care leavers have a relatively clear idea of the profession they would like to learn and the path they need to take. The fact that the young adults are at the same time in the process of leaving care seems to play little or no role for them in their transition into work. The two processes are described as parallel and yet (nearly) independent of each other. These transition processes usually involve cases in which the occupational aspirations and the path taken towards realizing them were continuously and consistently pursued over the entire course of the three interviews. These care leavers are no longer searching. Alternative occupational paths have no relevance for them and their career aspirations are not up for negotiation. They have a realistic and comprehensive view of their future career and have critically dealt with possible challenges to be met along the way to the chosen profession. The focus on a stable future career compensates (potential) uncertainties during the transition from residential care. By way of example, we cite below three excerpts from three interviews with Geraldine, who is aiming for a higher school leaving certificate and a subsequent course of study.

Geraldine, t1

Interviewer: And, um, what exactly do you do in school?

Geraldine: Uh, [qualification in the social field] (.) and I want to continue studying later.

Interviewer: What would you like to do?

Geraldine: Uh, [Profession A] (.) and preferably here [...], if not here, then in [European country A, bordering] (..) yes.

Geraldine, t2:

Interviewer: Would you talk a little about what your life looks like at the moment?

Geraldine: Um, yes, so I live in [European country A, bordering] in [Place A, European country A, bordering]. I'm studying to become a [Profession A]. [...]

Interviewer: What made you decide to study that?

Geraldine: Well, I'd wanted to study for quite some time. It was already clear that, even with my certificate, one has to study. [...] I had to choose between [Occupation B] and [Profession A]. And I decided for [Profession A] (laughs).

Geraldine, t3:

Interviewer: Would you tell me more about your university, what you're doing, and how things are going?

Geraldine: Um, so far it's actually quite easy. I had imagined it would somehow be more difficult/ but not really. (.) And, yeah (.), the internship is a bit more stressful when there is a lot to do. But otherwise it's really very easy and, in a way, very relaxing.

There are also care leavers who have concrete career aspirations but whose ideas about their future "dream"-job prove to be highly idealized. These notions about a profession in its ideal form are adapted or renegotiated during the transition into work, for example through internships. This ability to adaptation also becomes apparent when difficulties arise on the way to realize occupational aspirations: care leavers then consider alternatives or detours in attainment of the occupation. This adaptation of career goals turns out to be necessary in order not to endanger the process of leaving care. Excerpts from the interviews with Mona exemplify such vocational aspirations and paths to the desired occupation, which are adapted to the situational conditions as needed. As early as t1, she expresses the wish to take up an occupation, reporting on the origin and development of her professional aspirations.

Mona, t1:

Yes. I don't know, I wanted to/ I talked to a woman and she's been working as an [Occupation C] for forty years now, and she's been everywhere. She went over to [Place A, European country C, bordering], over/ and now she works on a boat [...]. And she sees everything, so beautiful, and I like to travel, and she convinced me, yes. [...] For/ it would be nice if I also got to have that (laughs). Because I don't want to stay in Luxembourg; I want to go everywhere. [...] I've already got it all in my head (laughs).

Mona, t2:

Interviewer: You said that you are now training in [Place G, Luxembourg] to become an [Occupation C]. [...] What steps were necessary?

Mona: I did, uh, this internships, uh/ trial courses or how do you say that/ I did/ I did trial courses. And I liked the second one so much that I wanted to do [Occupation C] (.) Yeah. I have/ I didn't know what it was like and everything and yes.

Mona, t3:

[...] so I am now in my first year, because I have to do it again/ one/ (laughs)/ I have to re/ repeat it because I had too many absences (.) that is/ I don't know the German word/ (.) uh, hours that were missing [...] now everything is working out, actually, yes, I have/ things are going okay for me now in school.

Unlike care leavers with concrete career aspirations, those still in the thick of the orientation process appear disoriented, undecided, or unmotivated with respect to their professional future (Jäger et al., 2016). The young people experience this disorientation as a crisis and it can negatively influence their leaving care process, because there are no ‘fitting’ support formats for them. As the example below shows, they seem to be without prospects and ‘drifting’ (Sennett, 1998).

Jonathan, t1:

Otherwise there’s not much else I can do (..) I don’t know what else I should do, now I can’t/ this year I screwed up, that means I can’t go back there, to another school. (.) What should I do? [...] And in the worst/ worst case, I go into [Occupation D] in [European country A, bordering] into [Occupation D], because then I have nothing else to lose anyway (.) because I/ I can’t do anything here, (..) can I?

During their transition from residential care, care leavers lack the time and financial resources, for example, to successfully master the associated challenges and at the same time figure out their professional future and face up to the demands of the labour market. In contrast to young adults without care experiences, they have almost no opportunities and phases of trial and error. They need concrete and realistic aspirations for most immediate pathways into work. Two trends can be distinguished in the transitions characterized by uncertainty and disorientation. First, the interviews reveal that although these care leavers are unable to name or describe a vocational orientation for themselves, they nonetheless continue to look for opportunities to prove themselves and/or to achieve a position in the world of work that is acceptable to them. Second, as in Mona’s case, they often refer to idealized job profiles in connection with ideas about social and career advancement. For this group of care leavers, there is often insufficient understanding of the combination of circumstances and skills required to enter these occupations.

Jonathan, t2:

But then I’d do it so that I’ve somehow done [Profession E]-school and I’m a [Profession E] or something cool like that. Then I would go to [Profession D]. Just to do the four months basic training. After that I would just go back to work. Then I’d just work my way up like that. [...] Then/ that would be cool.

Moreover, we found that alternative paths to vocational qualification that are attainable or accessible in their current situation are often rejected by negatively and rigidly setting limits, that is, focussing on what one is not willing to do.

Jonathan, t1:

I can’t do educator. Social assistance no, because I have no desire to work with old people; the same goes for nursery. Mechanic no; mechatronics no; locksmith no; no idea what else (...).

Taken together over time, the interviews reveal an unfulfilled quest for an unattainable ideal. In their search for direction and possibilities, care leavers see themselves as being under extreme (time) pressure. Above all, institutions involved in the transition process are perceived as the cause of pressure within the transition constellations. The care leavers describe feeling fatefully brought down by a web of entanglements formed by institutions. The offers and measures of support for (re-)producing opportunity and enabling structures are not perceived as such by these young adults.

Jonathan, t1:

After the internship, I didn't know what to do, but really, I really panicked because I was told, on September 11th or so, if you don't have anything, then you're out. I was told that very clearly, and I didn't have time; I had maybe one/ one month to really think about it [...].

Uh, that was at the [job and training placement agency], there I had to choose something. And everyone had already taken all the cool stuff [...]. The chances of getting accepted were very slim, because everyone wanted to do everything that was cool. [...] Then I just did that.

The responsibility for failed transitions into work is attributed to the actors operating in these transition constellations and to external (seemingly unalterable) conditions.

Sonja, t1:

R: At the beginning I wanted to do [Profession F]. But there I have to go to school for five more years and with [daughter's name] that's not so easy either, nor is it with the flats (.) which are made available to us. Mostly the projects there are planned for only three years (.) and after that, to get them extended again, that's (.) not always the case, and I don't want to take any risks (.) [...] and yes, actually, I always wanted to become an [Profession E], but with [daughter's name] that's no longer possible, because I have to stay the first year in school, like in a boarding school, and that's not possible with a child.

In transition processes experienced as difficult, the young adults are sometimes not able to gather experiences of self-efficacy, or only insufficiently so. As a result, self-initiated interruptions or terminations are frequently found when difficulties arise in the transition into work.

Sam, t3:

Interviewer: Please tell me what your life is like right now.

Sam: Um, yes, no idea, not good. Um, so I have no work and no school. And yeah (4). Otherwise, yes, no idea (10). No idea.

Interviewer: (7) Would you tell me about it in a little more detail?

Sam: Well, I dropped out of training because there were too many problems that couldn't be solved. [...] And yes, I've been sitting here ever since. And find nothing (...) (Mouth sounds). Yeah. (4).

In such cases, an actualization of biographical experiences occurs, which is connected with a dysfunctional, partly (re-)traumatizing processing loop. This process of confrontation with past experiences and their current effectiveness makes the transition into work all the more difficult and can make it impossible to achieve the desired occupational aims. In terms of institutional support of care leavers, these biographic experiences need to be worked up much more.

Sam, t3:

Interviewer: Would you talk a little bit more about how this came about?

Sam: Hmm (thinking) (.) that I broke it off? [...] I just wanted to go to school, but my main teacher told me that I would be unstable, and, um, what would be if I had children, would I kill myself like my mother did. And I reported that [...] Um (sighs), nothing helps. So that's why I just quit and did my thing.

Overall, the existence or non-existence of concrete vocational aspirations seems to be a key characteristic that determine care leavers' transitions into work. For those transitions characterized by uncertainty and disorientation, the path into the workplace proves to be fragmented and marked by frequent reorientations and changes. One group of care leavers processes these discontinuities by viewing them as enabling structures and part of the transition process as a whole. In a compensative way they are moving from station to station according to the situation. The other group, in contrast, tends to become mired in this lack of perspective and stops working towards the possible development of vocational aspirations or finding possible career paths. In these cases, the care leavers need systematic support that offers them a safety net as well as time and resources to try out themselves.

5.2 Retrospective construction of meaningful life plans as a combination of care and occupational biographies

The eight care leavers who were interviewed three to seven years after leaving residential care all report concrete occupational aspirations or say that they at least have an idea of the areas in which they would like to work later. The young adults state that their career aspirations either were known 'from an early age' or were formed during their stay in residential care institutions. Two of the care leavers explicitly name the professionals looking after them as role models and establish a causal connection between the staff's experienced support and their own occupational aspirations. Compared to the longitudinal interviews, it becomes clear that the care leavers create retrospective biographical coherence by reconciling their transition out of residential care to their transition into work.

Valérie:

Okay, sometime I want to work with handicapped children, or with people with a disability. Uh, yes, (.) the educators in the residential institution of course also liked that absolutely, and they also thought in some way that they were role models for me, somehow. Yes, I'm sure I did learn by watching from them a little.

Sandie:

My decision to become a [Profession F] also came around the time when things suddenly clicked for me. (.) And because I, yes/ and so I really started to observe what the educators were doing, what they did for us, what they generally stand for as social workers in residential care. And then the decision was made very quickly that I would like to do that as well.

All in all, many of the young adults strive for professional activities in which they can help other people. One of the decisive reasons that emerges in the interviews is care leavers' desire to give back to others some of the support they received.

Caro:

Um yes, I had actually only/ from an early age I wanted to work in [Institution A], so that I can help people. I'm not a [specialised profession] now, and I'm also not a [specialist staff occupation]. I'm perhaps only an [administrative occupation], but nevertheless I help people [...] Well this always makes me very, very, very happy, and that's why I'm so glad to be there, and everyone notices it too, because as soon as I step foot in [my workplace], I'm a different person.

The retrospective interviews reveal three different tendencies in the way young adults with residential care experiences pursue their occupational aspirations and shape their career paths. One tendency was the nearly seamless transition into an occupation; the second involved the

acquisition of formal educational qualifications or training arrangements and adjustments made in one's vocational aspirations, all with the support of flexible and professional guidance; and the third tendency describes transitions into precarious situations.

In the retrospective interviews it is possible to identify career paths that care leavers depict as seamless transitions and experience as unproblematic. These care leavers already achieve their first vocational school leaving certificate while living in the residential care institution. Here they receive the necessary support from the professionals. They begin vocational training in a field of their choice or in a comparable field also before leaving the institution or assisted living group, which gives them their own income at an early stage. The young adults gain experience of what it is like to be financially independent and combine this experience with a personal understanding of self-reliance. Overall, they can use these first occupational experiences productively for the transition out of residential care.

Thomas:

Hmm, and then, yes, I took the exam, I completed it. I did that too, without any problems. (.) And then I was hired by the same, um, (.) well by the same company [...]. During my apprenticeship, um, I still lived, um, (..) for a short time in residential care, but then I moved to assisted living.

They establish their position as care leavers who no longer need (comprehensive) help and support. By meeting the expected requirements set before them, these care leavers reproduce socially accepted notions of an 'autonomous' subject and a successful way of life. At the same time, they experience themselves as effective agents of their own lives.

Caro:

I thought I could do it without help, and I think I mastered it quite well. Now I work in [Institution A]; everyone (.) who sees me/ I'm always smiling, I'm cheerful, I try to help the old people [...]. I have a good job, I have both feet on the ground, I have a house, I have a di/ um, a dog (.) what more do I need? That's what counts [...] and I'm just glad that all/ all this is over and now I have my own life, and I'm very proud of it, (.) because I don't want to be dependent on [incomprehensible] anymore. I don't want that anymore, and now I can be proud of what I have. I have a job, and that's all I need; I'm no longer financially dependent on my parents [...] and I don't want that at all, after what they did to me [...].

Their placement in residential care institutions is understood and integrated as a normal part of their biography, and one that they value in retrospect as a positive experience. Care leavers distance themselves from prejudices about 'children in residential care'. They present themselves as individuals who have mastered the challenges encountered in their lives, despite or precisely because of their biography as 'residential child'. This perspective applies both to the transition out of residential care into independent living and to their path into work. The path taken is regarded as a personal achievement, which they managed as much as possible without the use of assistance or support.

Aline:

I've always been invited from/ to an interview, for a job interview, and, um, it's always very positively when you've done a traineeship, and also very positively, um, when they know, um, you've been, um, in residential care and now you've turned out, um, like this. That you can even think clearly [...]. And the/ that for most, um, patrons, most, um, bosses, yes, um, it has never bothered that, no. They would always ask: "Why in

residential care?” I always explained why. Because it’s not bad to say that my parents are divorced. I came there. That’s all it was. And, um, yes, they saw that I was already independent, was already more mature in my thinking than maybe others in my age.

In hindsight the care leavers create a meaningful connection between their care biography, their journey through life, and where they are in their lives at the time of the interview. Furthermore, the retrospective interviews reveal transition processes in which care leavers need or make use of the support of the professionals in order to achieve their occupational goals and their transition from school to work. The forms of support are versatile and to some extent flexibly adapted to the needs of young people (Bakketeig & Backe-Hansen, 2018). In addition to support in learning for school and final examinations, they include the search for an arrangement of training places as well as encouragement and preparation in the course of application procedures. Measures to provide tailor-made support are anchored only to a limited extent, or not at all, in the institutional programmes.

Jessica:

Uh, (..) and yes/ had/ had the residential home me/ uh, helped me a lot for/ in that, so that I could continue to grow and develop. [...] and I can only say thanks to them/ thank them that they helped me so much, in many ways, no matter how, they always supported me. Whether I wanted to leave, whether I wanted to come back, uh, work, school, everything (...) (laughs).

Thomas:

I went into a [voluntary service], that is what it’s called, it’s a traineeship that one can do with, um, the [provider of voluntary service] (.) um, I’m thankful to the educators, because of them I came up with the idea. They really helped me a lot, they were committed to it, they got on the phones, and did this and that.

In the retrospective interviews, the care leavers emphasize the support they received at that time, as well as the importance of obtaining a school leaving certificate in realizing their occupational aspirations or acquiring paid employment. For care leavers with poor school performance, in particular those with support needs, their vocational aspirations were adapted to the current situation during the process of leaving care. Care leavers had to realistically assess their career aspirations: for example, career goals were sometimes redirected to a new field through training recommended by the care professionals or through a traineeship. Alternatively, the young adults were informed about occupations similar to their desired occupation but with lower entry requirements.

Tia:

I had, uh, how long no work? And then I always, uh, went to the employment office. I never achieved anything at the employment office [...] And then, uh, I talked to, uh, [Residential Care A], and then [Ramona] told me, “Listen, if you keep insisting on working in the secretarial field, you won’t find any work. Go to the employment office and tell them, ‘Give me other work too.’ Whether it’s cleaning, a sales job, working with young people, a *déterminé* [temporary contract, the authors], or whatever.” And then I went to the employment office and told them that and then I got two places, which was, uh, a substitute.

This group of young adults interprets the transition out of residential care in two ways. Those who found their way into an occupation through the support of the professionals describe the transition from youth welfare in pragmatic terms. If, in their view, the support needs were met

and the assistance served its purpose, then the transition out of residential care or assisted living was considered to be the next logical step.

Thomas:

It is looked at, um, what you are doing in life, um, do you work? When you work, um, what do you earn? Um, then it's looked at, um, so is he, would he be ready to live alone? And so on. And if all this fits and everything fits financially, whether or not you have completed your education, whether you are not even in education. So when you, um, earn enough (.) um (..), that the state can add you (.), um, a small amount, um, that you have a whole wage, then the time has come to go.

Occupational activity at the workplace and a newly emerging social network, which the young adults experience as collegial and supportive, replace the support from the care professionals. The young adults begin to redefine themselves through their work environment and the recognition they received there.

Thomas:

And um (..) in the second year of apprenticeship everything, um, everything went really strongly uphill, and/ and suddenly my scores (.), they were top in the school. I got, uh, compliments; I really started to like the [workplace] then really. I also really saw potential in myself, and, um, somehow I felt good about myself because I got so much (.), um, feedbacks.

Other young adults, however, describe the loss of support as too abrupt. Often they found themselves in an insecure position at work and had only a temporary contract. They describe the transition out of residential care as a loss of security. Even several years after residential care, these cases show parallels to the experiences of pressure and the resulting concerns among the interviewed adolescents in the longitudinal study. The feeling of insecurity or fear (especially of homelessness) is associated in their telling with structural characteristics of Luxembourg's housing and labour markets. Not only do care leavers in Luxembourg find it difficult to finance their own housing; it is also highly unlikely that they can rent their own apartment if they have a temporary employment contract or work in the low-wage sector.

Sandie:

When I finished school, of course, everything went quickly (laughs). So [youth welfare office] put pressure on, like, um so especially [youth welfare office] put the pressure on. If it were up to the institution, they would have said, here, you can stay now as long as you get a job (.), have your own apartment [...] because at the time I had/ before I left assisted living, I had a work contract of only three months. And in those three months I would not have found an apartment in private.

A final and apparently precarious form of transition to work involves care leavers who have already left the institutional setting or assisted living group, but who have not managed the transition into a secure employment relationship. In the retrospective interviews, these care leavers describe the period after having left the youth welfare service as marked by various uncertainties. These young adults present a return to the institutions as a desired option at the time – and necessary in some cases. At the same time, however, the need to become and/or to be an adult and the need to assume responsibility for one's life after leaving residential care are associated with the desire to get on in life without support.

Jessica:

I could not get any further. I/ I didn't find a job anywhere (.), because the people weren't giving young people who came from the school a chance to do anything, and, um, I decided to come back. Then I called [Professional D]; I asked her_him, "Can I/ do you still have a place? Can I come back?" And then a few days later s_he called me: "Okay, you can come back." And, uh, they helped me, they had, uh, they had found something on, uh, in the [Luxembourg newspaper] for some (.) re/ retraining [...]. And then I spent the/ the time, while I went back to school, I stayed there, and they continued to help me.

In the situation they found themselves in at the time, the focus of the young adults was to do any form of work. The realization of their occupational aspirations faded into the background. The main purpose of 'having' a job served was to earn money for one's livelihood and to reduce insecurity.

Aline:

I knew only that I had to earn money, because – or begin a course of study or something – because otherwise you can't pay your living costs. [...] I started at [supermarket] (.) I started at [supermarket]. That was not the most ideal work, but the home always told us, "You *never* (.) get something so high; you usually go from small to big" [...] So I said to myself, Ok, I'll start here at [supermarket]; it's not the work I want, but I'll, uh, start by earning money, maybe saving a bit, so I can live alone later, support myself, feed myself. I'll start here, uh, I'll start here, uh, in [supermarket] and then look around, search for something else later. Because I wanted to anyway – I applied at [supermarket], but I always wanted to go to the [state-owned company]. [...] And it has always been my goal to work for the [state-owned company]. And it is the state. And um, I was educated by the state. [...] It's also the case that I wasn't looking for a job. I was looking for a place. That for me, um, at [state enterprise].

The acceptance of a wide variety of job offers is described as a transitional solution until a job requiring formal training could begin. The prospect of the desired occupation and the path to it are juxtaposed with the necessity of having to work in order to finance one's livelihood. In the interviews, this gap between wants and needs is discussed in hindsight in a way that brings the jobs experienced as detours into a meaningful context, one that was necessary until the desired career goals were achieved. In this way, the care leavers experience themselves as effective agents in their own care biography. Pathways into work and care biography are brought into a coherent context of meaning.

6 Conclusion

The empirical results show how in constellations of transitions different actors and the emerging incentives, encounters, and offers of support interact in the production of agency. This finding ties in with the idea of 'distributed agency', which conceives of agency as the quality of the 'assemblage' of these elements (Barad, 2007). According to this point of view, opportunity or enabling structures are a condition of subjective agency; this view directly confronts the assumption that agency is to be regarded as a property or competence of the individual subject. This article aimed to reconstruct these structures in the constellations of leaving care and in the context of occupational aspirations, and to elaborate on how the paths of care leavers into work are shaped.

The results show different ways in which young people in leaving care and living out of care gain access to the professional world, and how these different pathways are formed. The

results of the longitudinal and retrospective interviews clearly show that as the stay in institutional settings comes to an end, the young adults are confronted above all with the need to earn an independent living and to develop a career perspective, or at least a steady source of income. Hence, many consider direct entry into the labour market essential. When clear occupational aspirations exist, it becomes much easier to fashion a near seamless transition out of residential care and into work. In addition, the young adults show an openness to adapting their vocational aims and expectations to situational requirements and to regard this approach not as a limitation but as an extension of their options for action, which also helps along the path into work.

In this respect, the results of the longitudinal and the retrospective interviews differ. Whereas the young adults in the retrospective interviews claim to have developed concrete ideas about their career goals even before moving out of care, the young adults who are in the process of moving out of care are still in the process of searching. They have no or only vague ideas of the direction in which they wish to develop professionally. Accordingly, their occasionally aimless search process is sometimes also accompanied by resignation. In the transitional constellations, they do not perceive themselves as effective agents in their own lives. Instead of focusing on the opportunities that arise in everyday life, they focus primarily on the requirements and difficulties associated with transitions.⁷

Concrete vocational ideas also ease and positively influence the transition because professionals can then provide a higher level of targeted support. However, public policy in Luxembourg has a restrictive effect because it limits the opportunities for care leavers to try themselves out. Because state funding beyond the majority age is linked to conditions such as vocational training or schooling and offers little space for trial and error. At the same time, care leavers face the difficult conditions on the Luxembourg housing and employment markets. Care leavers experience this entanglement as externally produced pressure that they are forced to deal with, without being able to turn for support to their family of origin, for example. Quick career entry sometimes requires radical adjustments of one's occupational aspirations, as care leavers indicated in their differentiation between having a job and a working in a chosen vocation.

During their transition into work, care leavers continually deal with their care biography. The retrospective interviews in particular reveal how care leavers link both processes of transition together and bring them into a meaningful overall context. Through these processes of sense-making, they experience themselves in the transitional constellations as subjects with effective agency who have successfully mastered their path to an independent life. By contrast, the care leavers surveyed in the longitudinal study seem to be more deeply involved in a process of searching, without being able to classify these efforts meaningfully. Some of the young adults experience themselves as being trapped in this processing loop.

As seen in our empirical analysis, one way to achieve a meaningful combination of care biography and occupational biography is to pursue a social profession. The young adults want to return what they have experienced as helpful. At the same time, the social workers serve as professional role models.

⁷ Reflection on the sample helps explain the distinct contrast: for example, in contrast to participants in the longitudinal sample with the retrospective approach those care leavers were reached who perceive themselves as relatively "successful." Moreover, they are often still in touch with the former residential care facility.

Professionals in residential care and their support are key factors in the process of leaving care and finding the way into work. In particular, forms of help that are not (only) programme-oriented but flexibly adapted to the situation and needs of young adults are perceived as supportive and effective. The results of Bakketeig and Backe-Hansen (2018) and Hiles et al. (2013) underline the importance of flexible support. In their research, they identify flexible help and the quality of relationships with the responsible professionals as essential for the production of agency.

In specific, this could for example mean to implement a paid orientation year for the young adults leaving care which gives them time for orientation and experimentation but still financial security. This also might prevent dissatisfaction and changes within the occupation which at a later point can lead to a difficult financial situation. Another important policy change would have to be financially supporting young people even under the age of 25 who are currently without work. This prevents care leavers who (mostly) do not have any family support to get into a precarious life situation when they are not in school or not in employment.

To enhance a social network, which is as the results show a crucial aspect for transitions out of care and into work, professional but also peer support can provide social and emotional backup. In particular, the professionals often provide volunteer additional emotional support and counselling work. Care leavers often describe them as an important support on the way into work, which is why moral and practical support from professionals should be given high priority. Other studies have also shown how important and helpful this support is for the positive integration of care leavers into the world of work (Gilligan & Arnau-Sabatés, 2017; Arnau-Sabatés & Gilligan, 2015; Greeson & Bowen, 2008; Lemon, Hines, & Merdinger, 2005). Therefore, this most times unpaid work should be integrated into the institutional offer. Flexible comeback- or visitor-options could provide support for young adults in uncertain situations and help to maintain contact with the caregivers and friends. These informal networks also offer a range of information on the specific life situation of care leavers. Furthermore, an official network of care leavers in Luxembourg (like for example in England, Australia and Germany) could offer an exchange and an information gather point on experiences and career options.

With respect to practice, we conclude that care leavers need forms of assistance that take account of the actors' personal aspirations and that allow processes of searching and permit biographical loops in the transitions. The challenge is to adapt institutionalized support services flexibly to the specific situations of young adults, or to find alternative forms of assistance that are compatible with the needs of care leavers and that can lead to a broadening of perspectives with regard to their occupational aspirations and career pathways.

Overall, however, the empirical evidence suggests that in complex constellations of transition, much more is needed than flexible forms of support and stable relationships with professionals. The interviews reveal a multitude of aspects that influence the process of leaving care, the vocational aspirations and expectations, and the paths of care leavers into work. In the transitional constellations, the young adults move in their search in a continuum between clarity and disorientation. In addition to the temporal factor, an expanding network of social contacts – which often develops in the new work environment – is important. Arnau-Sabatés and Gilligan (2015) also point out that skills acquired before transition to work (e.g. through internships) can have a positive impact on the way to work. However, casual events or encounters are also described as influential by the young adults as long as they are

described as providing support, direction, or motivation by the care leavers. Yet care leavers also describe moments of failure as positive and productive as long as new opportunities arose for them in their future path. What matters is that the entangled spheres are brought into a meaningful relationship to situational conditions and that individual aspects or actors are recognized and used as opportunities in the context of facilitating ‘distributed agency’.

In regard to future research, it would be of great interest to see which occupational aspirations and paths to work have less successful care leavers (than in our sample) and which forms of agency are worked out in these instances. Furthermore, it would be exciting to follow how the occupational paths of care leavers from the longitudinal study continue to develop and to contrast these paths with the previous findings.

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