Population Review

The Transition from Foster Care to Adulthood in Poland

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Abstract

This paper explores the process of transition into adulthood from the foster care system in Poland in the context of the legal and institutional regulations shaping early adulthood. Despite the paradigm shift and the rule of moving away from institutional forms of foster care towards a diverse range of family based forms of care, the transition to adulthood from foster care is still highly institutionalised in Poland. The paper explains how the state, through its legal and institutional means, shapes biographies of care leavers towards the form of adulthood understood as the stage of reaching economic autonomy and starting a family. The paper draws on original qualitative research conducted with care leavers in Poland which was part of the *Public policies for completed adulthood. The case of Poland* project, which was conducted in 2015-2020 and funded by the Polish National Science Centre (NCN). The results show that the transition from care to adulthood is both accelerated and compressed and is perceived as rapid and chaotic by care leavers, and that the abrupt withdrawal of support makes the Polish care system less effective.

Keywords

Transition to adulthood, foster care, care leavers, Poland

1. Introduction

Life course research has been on the rise since the early 1980s in Western academia (e.g., Elder 1998; Arnett 2000; Kohli 1986, 2007; Leisering 2004; Settersten 2004; Walther 2009), and since the turn of the century in Polish academia (e.g., Brzezińska and Syska 2016; Szukalski 2016; Kotowska 2018; Grotowska-Leder 2019)[1]. The growing popularity of this perspective is associated with the transformation of industrial/modern societies into post-industrial/post-modern ones and the emergence of a new social order. The normative life pattern typical of the industrial stage implies that the successive stages of life (i.e., time for study in youth, work and then marriage and parenthood in adulthood and retirement in old age) occur in chronological order. The life pattern internalised during the socialisation process, regulated by the law and supported by the welfare state's mechanisms, organised around work and family in a standardised way, made individual biographies predictable (Kohli 1986, 2007) and stabilised the social order. Due to the increasing dynamism of life and processes of individualisation, liberalisation and emancipation at the next stage of social development, in post-modern society the individual has many more choices, which results in his/her relativization and development of reflexivity (Giddens 2002). Diverse forms of family life, segmentation and deregulation of the labour market, and the crisis of the welfare state increase risk and uncertainty. Biographies become individualised and fragmented (Beck 2002; Bauman 2006) during these processes. Social roles traditionally carried out in life stages like youth, adulthood, and old age are subject to de-standardisation, deregulation and de-linearity. The transition from youth to adulthood raises major concerns as this process is extended and the sequence of the following successive stages is changing: finishing education, finding a job, starting a household and starting a family. It also happens that young adults occupy several roles, such as student, worker, spouse, or parent, simultaneously.

Analyses of pathways of transition into adulthood are important issues from the point of view of both individual biographies and public policies that shape key areas of life: education, labour market, family life, housing, healthcare and social welfare. The life chances of young people at this stage of their biographies depend on various factors, including legal, structural and individual determinants. Public policies should also focus on young people, on their access to various resources and on their conditions of life because they are an influential group in the public sphere and play an important role in a global society. Public policies are one factor that influences whether young adults will become a problematic group demanding systemic assistance or a category of independent and autonomous individuals largely.

A special category of the young constitutes foster children. Legal solutions play a more important role in the lives of foster children than those growing up in biological families. Those leaving the foster care system have less access to family and social resources, their possibilities to build their own lives are more limited, they make their life choices less freely, more within the framework set by the care system.

Our main aim in this paper is to analyse the process of reaching adulthood by care leavers in Poland as experienced by young adults raised in foster custody, in the context of the legal and institutional regulations shaping this stage of life. Achieving adulthood is a process whose closure in subjective terms is to achieve the identity of an adult, and in objective terms to meet social expectations related to fulfilling the key social roles of an adult: completing education, having a permanent job, and starting a

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[1] It should be mentioned that life cycle analyzes in social sciences were initiated by Thomas and Znaniecki in their widely known life history study of Polish immigrants to USA in the early 20th century (Thomas and Znaniecki 1976).

household and family. Our main thesis is that foster children face difficulties reaching adulthood since they cannot take advantage of the opportunities and freedom of choice of their path towards adulthood in the post-modern world. Through its legal and institutional means, the state shapes their biographies towards the form of adulthood traditionally understood as the stage of reaching economic autonomy and starting a family. In the article we present: a) the theoretical framework for the analysis of entering adulthood, b) Polish foster care system from the perspective of solutions essential for the process of entering adulthood of care leavers, and c) various foster care leavers' pathways to adulthood. The empirical basis for the analyses is part of the qualitative data collected in the project *Public policies for completed adulthood. The case of Poland* (2015-2020).

2. The transition from foster care to adulthood: theoretical frameworks

The transition to adulthood is a multidimensional, institutionalised process of changing one's status, acquiring new social roles (graduation and transition to the labour market, living on one's own, forming a stable relationship and starting a family) and personal development aimed at reaching the status of an adult (see also Hogan and Astone 1986; Elder and O'Rand 1995). In post-modern societies, the transition to adulthood has lengthened and has become a separate phase of life with distinct characteristics. The identified new stage is described as 'prolonged adolescence' (Béjin 1983), 'post-adolescence' (Béjin 1983; Galland 2003), 'emerging adulthood' (Arnett 2004), 'early adulthood' or 'young adulthood' (Hartmann and Swartz 2006), 'arrested adulthood' (Hendry and Kloep 2011), and 'postponed adulthood' (Brzezińska, Kaczan, Piotrowski, Rękosiewicz 2010). Adulthood has become contemporarily less demographically normative and less determined by external religious, moral, institutional, legal and gender-based cultural norms than it was before (Beck and Beck-Gernsheim 1995; Sennett 1998). It has become more of an individual project developed by a person, rather than rules formed by institutions such as the traditional family, the labour market, religion, the legal system or morality. According to post-modern interpretations of the contemporary world, reaching adulthood in a liquid world – a world described by flexibility, versatility, and adaptability – is accompanied by much more opportunities, choices and paths than in modern society (Bauman 2006; Bauman and Leoncini 2018). It is a time of exploring and experimenting while making career choices, building intimate relationships, undertaking enjoyable social activities and roles as well as building one's own identity and shaping one's attitudes. There is growing social consent for young people to postpone completed adulthood for the sake of greater self-fulfilment, satisfactory identities and choices (Brzezińska and Syska 2016: 24-26). The period of emerging adulthood offers an opportunity to devote one's entire attention and activities to oneself, to better insight into personal needs and personal development, and to build self-esteem and control over one's life. All these experiences delay becoming fully adult, which requires focusing on others and the principles of social life (Arnett 2004; Brzezińska and Syska 2016: 25).

These tendencies, typical of late (liquid) modernity (Bauman 2006), seem to be less characteristic of children and adolescents from the lower classes, who are socially excluded in various dimensions of life. The individual life courses to adulthood of youth with smaller socio-cultural capital reflect social, economic and political changes stronger (Kohli 1986; Evans and Heinz 1994; Elder and O'Rand 1995; Du Bois-Reymond 1998; Heinz and Marshall 2003). While both middle and upper-class young adults tend to focus on personal fulfilment in early adulthood (Benson and Furstenberg 2007), lower class young members follow the traditional pathway of reaching adulthood at a faster pace (Silva 2012: 508) and tend to identify adulthood mainly with objective markers: finding a job and starting a family (Plug, Zeijl, Du Bois-Reymond 2003). According to some studies, youth who occupy marginal social positions, mainly in terms of social class, educational attainment and race/ethnicity, do not stand a chance to

experience the life stage described by Arnett (2004) as emerging adulthood (i.a. Hendry and Kloep 2007, 2011; Syed 2015).

Young people permanently or temporarily deprived of suitable care in their biological families are placed in various types of facilities provided by the state, such as educational care centres, family type children's homes, emergency shelters and socialisation facilities, as well as foster homes. The transition from the foster care system to adulthood has an established place in social research (e.g., Lemona, Hines, Merdinger 2005; Stein 2006, 2014; Geenen and Powers 2007; Stein and Munro 2008; Harder et.al. 2011; Fransson and Storø 2011). Their results document that care leavers are more vulnerable and threatened with social exclusion during childhood and adolescence and very often experience multiple deprivations like poverty and negligence, discrimination and stigma, which seriously limits their freedom to choose and successfully follow favourable pathways to adulthood. Their adult life more often characterises limited educational attainment, poor housing with the risk of homelessness, economic instability with the risk of long-term unemployment or precarious employment, unplanned parenthood, health (including mental) problems, public assistance dependence and involvement with the legal system (Barth 1990; Cook 1994; Courtney, Piliavin, Grogan-Kaylor, Nesmith 2001; Needell et. al. 2002). In the transition to adulthood care leavers are 'both accelerated and compressed into a short space of time' (Biehal and Wade 1996: 443) with a trajectory and the potential for crisis. They usually became adults faster. According to Lee and Berrick (2014:78), 'youth exiting foster care, however, typically have rigid, policy-driven timelines within which they must exit and few options to extend their transition timeline, or return to care during times of need'. Their life course is highly institutionalized (Kohli 2007: 256) and, similar to the modern era, it is organized around professional and family roles, in accordance with the normative pattern characteristic for a given gender and social class.

3. The foster care system in Poland and selected regulations of leaving the system

In the late 20th century, Poland (like many European countries two decades before) implemented a foster care model built around families[2]. The process of deinstitutionalization of care for children who do not have appropriate conditions for development in their biological families accelerated after 2004 due to Poland's integration with the European Union with the need to adapt to international human rights standards (Andrzejewski 2019).

The legal framework for the transformation of the Polish childcare system is The Act on Family Support and Foster Care of June 9, 2011 (Ustawa o wspieraniu rodziny… 2011), which is in force from the beginning of 2012[3]. The regulation places foster care in Poland within a range of state policy addressed

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[2] With the development of family foster care, the total number of children staying in orphanages was systematically decreasing. In Poland, in 1989 there were 63,700 children in foster care, including 32,087 in foster family care and 31,683 in institutional custody (Kolankiewicz 2017: 74). In 2020, there were 71,500 children in foster care: 55,500 in foster family care and 16,000 in institutional custody. The foster care system consisted of 36,540 family foster care units (foster families or foster homes) and 1,205 institutional care facilities (with an average of 13 children in each entity) (GUS 2021: 1-2).

[3] Until 1999 foster care issues were regulated in Poland by the Act on the Educational System and from 1999 to 2012 by the Social Welfare Act. Now, apart from the Act on Family Support and Foster Care of 2011, it is also regulated by: the Constitution of the Republic of Poland (Art. 48, sec. 1 and Art. 18), European Convention on Human Rights (Art. 8 and judicial decisions of the European Court of Human Rights in Strasbourg), Convention on the Rights of the Child (Art. 20, 5, 18 and 9, sec. 3), Family and Guardianship Code (Art. 100, 109, 110, 111, 112 and 113), Code of Civil Procedure – provisions on removing children from parents or carers (Andrzejewski 2019:1).

to the family. The new childcare system is based on the high social position of the family in Poland, also including dysfunctional families which threatens the exercise of the rights of the child. In the draft of the Act prepared by Ministry of Labor, Family and Social Policy, it was assumed that "the main reason for child placement in a foster family is a lack of effective support available to marginalised families that suffer from multiple deficits and do not create suitable conditions for child development" (Ministerstwo Pracy, Rodziny i Polityki Społecznej 2008: 11). The regulation states that foster care should be periodic and, whenever possible, should aim to integrate a child with his family, and only in exceptional cases to protect the child from their parents.[4]

The Polish foster care system consists of institutional foster care, i.e., various care and educational institutions of the socialization and intervention type, and family foster care. Family foster care in Poland exists in two forms: foster families and foster homes. Foster families can offer (adapted from Królak and Rączka 2017: 151-198):

- kinship/related foster care (foster family created only by the grandparents or siblings of the child to care, those close relatives of the child who have a maintenance obligation towards him),
- non-kin/non-professional foster care (it can be created both by the child's relatives who are not the child's grandparents or siblings, i.e., aunt, uncle, as well as by people unrelated to the child),
- professional foster care (a family with which the County Executive signs a fixed-term care agreement, and one of the parents receives a fixed monthly remuneration/salary for this; the child is placed in such family for at least 4 years or, in case of an emergency, up to four months, i.e., until their legal situation is regulated or court proceedings are completed),
- specialist foster care (for children with disabilities, teenage mothers with children or minors).

The foster home is a family that hosts a larger group of children, including up to eight orphans and a number of adopted or biological children). The County Executive signs a fixed care contract for up to five years with the person running such family orphanage, providing a fixed monthly remuneration/salary (Ibidem).

Data on the implementation of the programme under the new act recorded a 1/3 decrease in the number of children entering into foster care (Ministerstwo Rodziny i Polityki Społecznej 2019: 20)[5] and a systematic, slow increase in the proportion of children in family foster care among all foster children – from 71% in 2005 to 75% in 2015 (GUS 2019: 20) and to more than 76% in 2020 (GUS 2021:1). It is extremely important that the limitation of parental authority, which most often results in placing the child in family foster care, results in the transfer of daily care and care for the child to foster caregivers, while all important life decisions remain with the biological parents. It is worth underlining that in 2020 four out of five of all family foster children had both parents who, despite everything, were unable or unwilling to properly fulfill their educational functions. In the same year, the majority (almost 2/3) of foster families were related families, about 30% non-professional families, and about 6% professional families (GUS 2021:1).

In accordance with applicable Polish law, children deprived of proper care and conditions for upbringing in their biological family are placed in foster care until they reach majority at 18 years of age, and if

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[4] Axiologically, these changes rest on three main pillars: a) the right of children to a family, b) parents' primacy of responsibility for their children's upbringing, c) the principle of supportiveness that implies that the system should help parents regain their parental rights over a child placed in foster care (Andrzejewski 2019:1).

[5] The decrease is partially the result of an ideological priority of leaving children in their biological families despite negligence (Ministerstwo Rodziny i Polityki Społecznej 2019:20).

they remain in education or undertake an apprenticeship, they can stay in foster care up to age 25. In 2020, young adults aged 18-24 constituted a significant group of the total foster people. They constituted more than 18% of the total foster children stayed in family foster care and almost 11% of the total foster children in institutional foster care. Every year, nearly 6,000 Polish foster children left foster care units and institutions[6], more than a half of them reached the age of majority (i.e., 18 years old). In the same year, among all family foster children over the age 18, almost 40% did not leave the family foster care, about 56% set up their own household during the year, and 5.4% returned to the biological family or relatives. Analogous data for all institutional foster children are 10%, 54% and 36% (GUS 2021: 1-2). In the last decade, there has been a noticeable increase in the number of foster pupils who want to extend the period of staying in foster care and do not want, primarily due to the lack of housing, lack of employment or unstable employment, to start life on their own responsibility. Remaining in foster care enables continuation of education and gaining qualifications without fear of housing and maintenance, and staying in a foster family additionally strengthens the sense of belonging to a family or community (Jerszow 2019: 84-86).

Preparing adolescents for the transition to adulthood is a complex process that requires appropriate conditions for their development. Family forms of care in comparison with institutional forms of care generally create better conditions for shaping young people's attitudes that are important in the process of becoming independent, but the process should involve the foster child and all structures and institutions constituting the environment of foster care. The environment constitutes first, the biological family and the foster family, but also institutions involved in the process of strengthening and restoring child-parent relations (educators, family foster care coordinators, family assistants, social welfare centres, family courts). Schools, non-governmental organizations and labour offices and employers also play an important role in this process. The effectiveness of the system in terms of the transition of foster leavers to independent adult life depends on professionalism and cooperation between these units and institutions. Appropriate financial support is also a necessary condition for foster care leavers to become independent.

The new 2011 Polish Act on Family Support and Foster Care System deals with the issue of care leaving by young people of age of majority. The initial stage of the process of becoming independent is important for its subsequent course, and leavers of foster care is a significant group of young people who are becoming voters, customers, employees, parents and the target population of public policies at the same time. In the face of legal perspectives, care leavers reaching adulthood have access to several means of social assistance. In order to receive support – for further education or independent living – the foster child who comes of age must submit the appropriate application himself and have an approved individual transition plan. The plan is developed by the teenager together with his/her independence supervisor (foster parent in foster families), who should be appointed at least one year before their 18th birthday[7]. It specifies the scope of cooperation between the supervisor and the teen. The person's independence is assessed when the formal process of gaining independence is completed.

The authors of the commentary on the Act on Family Support and Foster Care System briefly describe the following individual independence assistances addressed to care leavers (Królak and Rączka 2017: 427-457):

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[6] Some of them returned to a natural family or family of relatives, some were transferred to adoption, some change form of family foster care and some established their own household.

[7] The plan is approved by the head of the *powiat* (county) family support centre and is submitted at least one month prior to the teenager reaching age of majority.

- An assistance for further education, granted without an income test if the person continues education at school or university, or undertakes other courses in line with the individual independence assistance plan, or undergoes vocational training. The assistance is granted as a monetary benefit, not less than EUR 117 per month[8], for the duration of education until the care leaver reaches the age of 25.
- A financial independence assistance, which depends on the duration of staying in foster care.[9] It may be granted as a lump sum or in instalments before the care leaver reaches the age of 26. If a care leaver receives educational assistance, independence assistance aid is usually paid out after the education assistance has been discontinued.
- A one-time financial resettlement allowance granted to a care leaver before the age of 26 in the amount of not less than EUR 370, and for a care leaver with certified moderate or severe disability – not less than EUR 740. This type of aid can also be granted in kind.
- An assistance with finding suitable accommodation lies with the entities obliged to offer this type of assistance and is not determined by the Act on Family Support and Foster Care. The assistance can be offered in the following forms: a) full or partial reimbursement of expenses related to renting a room; b) facilitation in obtaining subsidised social housing from the resources of the municipality (*gmina*); c) allocating a room in a dormitory or school boarding house before a care leaver completing education; or d) full/partial reimbursement of accommodation expenses for a care leaver studying at a university.

Assistance for further education, monetary independence assistance and resettlement allowance are granted to a care leaver who has been in foster care for at least: a) three years in case of a kinship foster care, or b) one year in case of a non-kin or professional foster family, family-type children's home, educational care centre or regional therapeutic care centre. The monetary independence assistance and resettlement allowance are granted to a care leaver whose monthly income does not exceed EUR 280. If the care leaver's monthly income is higher, the independence assistance and resettlement allowance can be granted if this is justified by a difficult housing, economic or personal situation.

On the basis of another Polish legal act[10], sheltered housing is also organized for foster children. This form of assistance is aimed at preparing a care leaver to lead an independent life under the supervision of specialists who can also support them in everyday life. Care leavers can also count on assistance with finding a job, legal and psychological aid. They can receive support in obtaining appropriate education in accordance with their capabilities and aspirations as well as professional qualifications.

4. Data and method

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[8] To compare, since January 1,2019, the minimum wage for a full-time employment contract was less than EUR 530 gross, i.e., approximately EUR 384 net.

[9] Not less than EUR 815 in case of at least 3 years spent by a child in kinship foster care; not less than EUR 1,630 in case of at least three years spent by he/she in non-kin foster family, family-type children's home, educational care centre or regional therapeutic care centre; not less than EUR 815 for those spending two to three years in these types of foster care; and not less than EUR 407 for those spending one to two years there.

[10] Sheltered housing can be granted to a care leaver of legal age, who needs support in everyday life due to a difficult life situation, age, disability or disease but who does not require 24-hour care. Sheltered accommodation can be run by any social welfare organisational unit or public benefit institution (Art. 53 of the Act on Social Welfare of Marc 12, 2004 (Ustawa o pomocy społecznej 2004).

Polish studies on the process of entering adulthood of foster children are mostly quantitative. The subject of the analysis is the scale and dynamics of mature foster leavers of both family and institutional foster care and those benefiting from the independence programs. Few qualitative studies generally concern expert opinions on the implementation of foster children transition programs, less often the experiences of mature care leavers participating in these programs (Mickiewicz-Stopa 2016, Jerszow 2019). We argue that a more in-depth look at the fate of foster children after leaving the foster care is important in understanding the success of the system.

We use qualitative data collected as a part of the research project '*Public policies for completed adulthood. The case of Poland*' to understand the transition from care to adulthood in the perspective of legal regulations, which are supposed to support this process and the experiences of foster care leavers. The aim of this data collection was to define the extent to which political and institutional instruments constitute a coordinated policy in the area of young Poles reaching adulthood. The project was carried out using a diverse methodological instrumentation: focused group interviews (FGI), in-depth quasi-biographical interviews (IDI), official documents and available statistics. The reconstruction of the paths of reaching adulthood by young Poles dealt with in the present study was one of the three main tasks that made up the project's research programme[11].

Sample

The sample consists of 41 young adult foster care leavers who meet the following sampling criteria:
1. They were born in 1986 or later and reached adulthood in 2004 or a little later when Poland was an EU member.
2. They grew up at least between the age of 15 and 18 in foster care (and lived in foster families, foster homes or educational care centres until age 18) in Lodz province.
3. They had diverse social and economic characteristics, such as sex, family situation, occupation, level of education and housing conditions.

Out of 41 participants, 27 took part in three focus group interviews (FGI) and 14 shared their stories within in-depth interviews (IDI). We recruited the care leavers using snowball sampling (we reached them through social media, such as Facebook, personal contacts of orphanage directors and personal contacts of people already recruited). The age range of the interviewed was from 28 to 32 years. Interviewees described their paths to reaching adulthood and discussed factors that hinder and facilitate the process of reaching adulthood in today's uncertain times.

Data collection

We conducted the interviews in line with a qualitative methodological paradigm using two techniques: focus group interviews (FGI) and in-depth quasi-biographical interviews (IDI). We chose FGI because they enable to explore opinions and patterns of perceiving, thinking, judging and behaving as well as to reconstruct social meanings and group experiences. The advantage of group interviews is that participants interacting with each other show higher activity and creativity. Group interactions facilitate

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[11] The other main tasks in the project included: 1. social policy actions and models towards/aimed at young adults described in Polish and foreign academic literature and in legal acts and strategies formulated by Polish central and local authorities; 2. concepts of adulthood formulated both by Polish social policy institutions and by young adults.

the expression of emotions, unconscious or difficult to express opinions. Additionally, during the discussion, they verify their views, often reaching a common conclusion, which increases the accuracy of the information obtained. The technique enables collecting information from relatively many respondents in a relatively short period. Whereas the individual biographical interviews allow the natural self-expression of the respondents, to reach and reconstruct their social world as they experience it, perceive it, understand it, interpret it, with the whole social context. The purpose of narration is to obtain information about the phases of the narrator's life that are of interest to the researcher, especially those phases that are most problematic in certain respects. Such phases experienced by the individual and narrated in the narrative are reproduced in the same order. In this way, the narrative reveals what was happening in the narrator's social space from the point of view of the individuals participating and acting in it. The narrative provides an opportunity to capture the social worlds and processes involved in the life course with social, situational, cultural and psychological factors. In the narrative, the narrator reconstructs the course of events; in the argumentative part, the narrator attempts to evaluate, summarize, and present his own theories about the events he experienced.

In the interviews, we used an interview guide: FGI scenario and a list of issues to be explored during the IDI. Among other things, we asked interviewees:

- to define adulthood (e.g., the meaning of adulthood and experiences that are considered to be typical of reaching adulthood),
- to describe the process of reaching adulthood in biographical order, that is how the pathway looked step by step since approximately the age of 15, taking into account educational and professional career, family situation, personal development and identity formation; the expectations and needs that define completed adulthood; and the shape of social networks, including support networks during the transition to adult.

Methods of analysis

We analysed the paths of transition into adulthood of the surveyed young adult foster care leavers qualitatively, and we read transcripts multiple times in full and in fragments using notes (flashcards). Next, we developed key analytical categories and based on them we analysed transcripts until we reached theoretical saturation. We carried out analytical abstraction, i.e., we identified specific and general characteristics of a case under analysis and compared it to others. The most important task for us in this phase of research was to describe the dependencies and relationships between the structural processes of biography and then contrastive comparison, i.e., comparing the first case with subsequent, thematically similar cases using categories obtained by analytical abstraction. Finally, we generated a theoretical model aimed at identifying the types of socio-biographical processes. Being aware of the diversity of experiences of so many participants, we assumed that it is possible to reconstruct the processes of becoming an adult in its possibly typical course. We characterized below the types of transitions into adulthood, which we reconstructed through analysis of the interviews in individual and social and institutional dimensions. The types presented are our theoretical and analytical proposal that can be tested in research on adulthood conducted with another category of young adults. We used NVivo software in the analytical process.

At every stage of the conceptualization, design and implementation of research, we followed the standards of sociological methodology and the constructionist approach as well as ethical standards in social sciences.

The specificity of the topics discussed in the interview (they concerned very personal matters, often very difficult and unpleasant life experiences) and the specificity of the participants (their psychosocial profile, including their attitude towards their own life, relatively low level of education, generally low language competences or willingness to undertake emotional and intellectual effort to tell their life story) required the empowering approach to the respondents, i.e., establishing a relationship based on respect, empowerment and trust. All interviews were conducted by members of the research team, who are very experienced researchers. We reliably informed our IDI and FGI participants about the purpose of the study, its course and the rules applicable during the interview. We asked them for consent to participate in the interview and to record the interview. We preceded a proper interview by a casual conversation with the respondent in order to gain his/her trust, openness and build his/her self-esteem. The FGI moderators also informed the participants that she/he would not interrupt their statements, that they could tell their biographies in detail, that she/he had plenty of time to talk. We informed the respondents about the importance of his/her life experiences for the conducted research and that the information obtained from them will be secured by data anonymization at every stage of the research and its unavailability to third parties. Also, all persons recruiting the participants in the study, in line with legal requirements, deleted all sensitive data on them. We archived the data obtained from IDI and FGI participants on data carriers without access to the Internet and without access by third parties.

5. Results

Rich empirical material obtained during many hours of conversations with young people out of foster care allowed for the confirmation of several initially assumed theses, which are also confirmed by researchers of the processes of transition into adulthood (Biehal and Wade 1996, Wieczorek 2016): this period of time seems to be a shortened, accelerated moment (rather than long process) in life with limited access to resources. Young people from foster care included in our study focused on traditional activities considered as adults relatively early in their biographies: taking up gainful employment, starting a family and being economically independent. They became mothers/fathers early, often under the age of 20, and started earning a living as teenagers on a regular basis. Independence (i.e., living without biological family and state support or social assistance) in taking on these social roles is usually both a life goal and the necessity to cope with difficult life circumstances. Their opportunities to pursue less standard lifestyles are sometimes limited, but this traditional pattern of living is rewarding for almost all studied young care leavers.

The process of reaching adulthood by foster children is quite highly institutionalised in Poland. The state, through instruments aimed at supporting the process of becoming independent, strictly controls the course of life of young adults, making this stage in their lives and the achieved pattern of adulthood predictable. This pattern entails adulthood focused on social, mainly professional and family, roles in their traditional sense as key determinants of adulthood. Three main state supported transitions into adulthood emerged from the analysis: a) formation of an independent agency, b) the transition from education to the labour market, and c) establishing one's own household and family. Next, we will talk about each of these in more detail.

a) Formation of an independent agency

By means of regulations, the state attempts to shape the care leaver's agency, characterised by independence, responsibility, ability to act autonomously and control over his/her life. This task is

fulfilled in the form of a compulsory individual transition assistance plan implemented with the help of the independence supervisor – a condition for receiving financial assistance. The plan imposes an obligation on the care leaver to take action and change their behaviours and life situation in order to adjust to the status of independent living outside the care setting. The independent supervisor offers assistance in fulfilling obligations related to the process of aging out of care and autonomous functioning. The independence supervisor is the person who can offer emotional and social support to a young person, who naturally fears the future. This requires the ability to establish and maintain a close relationship with a care leaver who faces various difficulties. In practice, despite best intentions, supervisors often lack qualifications and the ability to genuinely support a care leaver.

The interviewees tend to perceive their individual transition assistance plans as a bureaucratic tool rather than a developmental task, and a challenge which can be useful in acquiring the skills of independent living and fulfilling life goals. Some of the interviewees cannot even remember what the plan envisaged or who their supervisor was, although the aging out foster child has the right to choose any adult to be his/her supervisor, including a biological parent. In practice, birth parents or grandparents often fulfil the role of supervisor. They are the same people who were incapable of providing the child with the optimal environment for development, which resulted in their placement in foster care. Some interviewees, when asked about the supervisor, stated:

> *I cannot even recall someone like independence supervisor at all. (R7/FGI1[12]).*

> *No, there was someone on the paper… (laughs) (R2/FGI1).*

> *There was nothing like this at all (...) At least I didn't have it. They're just telling you more or less what your legal guardian, who will take care of you, will have to do when you leave the orphanage. Well, go to the office there, apply for a flat and get money. This is to prepare you somehow, I don't know if they are mentally preparing you for anything. They only (...) help you to arrange the formalities such as arranging a flat, arranging the money you are supposed to get there, and they are not helping you with anything else (...) when I left the orphanage, I waited for a flat for two years, right? Well, if someone has no family, nowhere to go, what is he supposed to do during these two years? Well, he won't do anything (...) It's like leaving an orphanage. At least in my case it was like that. (R1/IDI).*

Some care leavers expect supervisors' support. When they are asked how the state should help them at this stage of starting an independent life, they said:

> *Take some interest. Because some people can't manage. (R2/IDI).*

> *When we get independent, maybe someone like that should visit us... I don't know, once a month, I don't know, maybe something like that? To be interested in our life, or to be able to cope with it. (R2/FGI1).*

A few interviewees revealed that there was no supervisor's support, when it was needed, it was usually too late:

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[12] The following abbreviations have been used: IDI 1,2,3…– number of in-depth interview, FGI 1,2,3.. – number of focus group interview and R1,2,3…– number of interviewee in IDI or FGI.

The educator from an orphanage is like when we are independent, then thank you, goodbye. (R2/FGI1).

They are concerned in when something bad happens, after the fact. (R7, R2 and R8 confirm/ FGI1).

Some care leavers suggest that such support is available to people who do not cause educational problems, who cooperate with educators at the center. As some young men told us:

They helped my sister (...) she studied well, did not run away and caused no trouble (...) my sister left the orphanage right away when she was eighteen (...) She was granted an apartment, because the orphanage helped her there (...) Sister cooperated with an orphanage well. (R1/IDI).

Taking into account the personality-building dimension of the transition to adulthood supported by the state, care leavers follow one of two paths of reaching adulthood: *yo-yo transition path*[13] (Walther 2006) and *the path of reaching adulthood by breaking all ties* with the biological family and original milieu. The first of the indicated paths is de facto the return to the biological family and its milieu. Young care leavers often have nowhere to go after leaving the care setting, have no one close to them or a place to live. Such a situation forces them to return to the environment from which they were taken away a few years earlier as neglected children. When they enter into closer partnerships in their adult life, they move out of the family home and live with their partner, leading an independent life for some time. As their intimate relationships are generally fragile, they often return to their biological family even when they become parents. The yo-yo transition also applies to their economic independence. When they lose their jobs as a livelihood, they reach the resources of their parents, grandparents or former neighbourhood colleagues. One young man told and explained to us:

Well, I just remember the brawls, the runaways and the drugs, the alcohol from the family home. I mean, dad didn't live with us because dad spent half of his life in prison. When I left the orphanage, he just left prison (...) mom also abused alcohol and. . . And I don't know, maybe that's why I did the same. I mean, I'm not saying I'm abusing, but there are days that the weekend is, Friday comes and I'm gone. [SIGHING] Well, it was the same at the orphanage. The weekend was coming, I was coming family home and I was coming back on Sunday. (...) I left the orphanage, went back to my mom's (...). If you don't work, you don't do anything, and I was a heavy drug addict (...) As long as you're on drugs, nobody can help you (...) you just sit there and go out, do the same thing and steal and do drugs, and you don't have anyone to help you, it's hard. And the family turns away from such people (...) I still live with my mom and there are still the same problems that I have to move out from time to time because I fight with my mom and partner. We all live on 18metres flat, it's really hard. (R1/IDI).

The other path is *reaching adulthood by breaking all ties* with the biological family and original milieu that sometimes demand their return. These foster children put a lot of energy and effort into severing

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[13] Yo-to transition is a metaphor for a kind of transition into adulthood that is reversible and means a return to a stage of lesser independence (e.g., a return to living with parents after a period of temporary economic independence; interruption of education and subsequent returns to school to complete it).

ties with negative significant others; almost the entire biographical work is devoted to dealing with trauma on the one hand and remorse on the other. As some young women told us:

I'm gonna say I want to cut myself off from this chapter, too, because it's no good, right? Because I talk, I do their business, I help them, and I end up getting terribly nervous. Anyway, I'm treating myself psychologically, because I couldn't stand what I was going through. I want to live a normal life. (R5/IDI).

I tried to be different from my family. (R3/IDI).

b) Transition from education to the labour market

Completing education and entering the labour market is another transition path strongly supported by the state. Young care leavers have access to assistance for further education. Every foster child who continues education is entitled to this form of 'scholarship' until the age of 25. Thus, the foster child is encouraged to acquire qualifications in order to enter the labour market. Taking into account the cost of living, the amount of this aid is insufficient (about EUR 120 per month) and does not constitute the majority of the young adult's personal budget. The care leaver has to find a job and earn money. It is impossible to combine full-time study and employment, which diminishes the motivation to continue study. Therefore, this universal type of aid, meant to promote the transition to the labour market, fails to fulfil its objective. Due to school failures in childhood, many foster children show little interest in further education, while they often treat obtaining this cash benefit as a goal in itself and not a means of achieving one's autonomy.

Foster children from children's homes should also participate in programmes preparing them for adulthood, which include issues related to finding a job (writing CVs, job search and job interviews). Unfortunately, such training sessions are not offered to everyone. They are organised by NGOs whose limited resources make it possible to enrol a dozen or so participants. As a rule, heads of foster care facilities send young people with good grades and no behavioural problems to such trainings. Which means that other students suffer from double exclusion.

The state treats support for transition from foster care via school to stable employment as a priority because stable employment is crucial for gaining material independence and autonomy. However, the resources allocated make it impossible to reach the intended goal. Former foster children usually join the ranks of the unemployed or working poor (who have precarious, temporary, low-paid jobs with no social security). Female care leavers often become housewives whose main task is to raise children. From the point of view of fulfilling an occupational function, two major paths to reaching adulthood emerged. One of them is the relatively rare *transition to adulthood via education*. It is undertaken by those who perceive education as value in itself and important social capital. Young adults leaving foster care generally have more problems in learning and it is more difficult for them to achieve educational success than young adults from biological families. It is difficult for foster youth to see the intrinsic value of education and to follow a preconceived educational career path. It takes significantly more effort and sacrifice from them to get educated compared to their peers who have greater cultural capital. Our research revealed that, students from foster care go through periods of interrupted and resumed attempts at studying. Those of them who consistently strive to obtain education have higher likelihood of graduating even from higher education. As one of care leavers said:

I wanted to move out of the house very much, the conditions I had in this family [foster]. Uh, my parents were obviously against my marriage, moving out, because I was. . . as a sick person I was considered to stay home and take care of my foster parents [mhm]. And since I have a character to do things in spite of everything (...), I insisted that I'd finish my studies, that maybe I could get a job, and that I'd move out, and I wouldn't stay home and I wouldn't, I don't know what to call it, right? Just serve foster parents... I never had the best relationship with my foster father. (R2/IDI).

This path is more often chosen by young people brought up in foster families (as opposed to children's homes), where resources, capital and belief in the value of education are greater, and opportunities for an individual approach to developing abilities and talents are more real.

The other pathway is the *transition to adulthood through employment*, which is far more frequent among care leavers. The only capital that the majority of care leavers have is time, motivation and perseverance. They felt being forced to take on a job very early in their lives. They do not have much opportunity to experiment in this area and look for a more satisfactory job. As interviewees noted:

I had to put work higher than school, so I failed my high school exam, and now it's still a problem that I can't go on studying, and somehow (…) I'm gonna have to get myself together and improve my high school exam, because time is running out too. (R8/FGI2).

I mean, some people choose to learn, right? Only that there is a possibility that they are subsidizing us for this study. It's just that these are so ridiculous amounts that you have to stop learning anyway. At least it was so in my case that maybe I would have gone further along this path of education, but unfortunately it is hard to make a living for 600 zlotys [about EUR 130] *a month. (R7/FGI1).*

I started my first job at the age of 16, side job in a small sewing room on weekends and in the afternoons, on the recommendation of my friend. When I turned 18, I told the lady that she was either hiring me or that I was going to look further because I needed a permanent job and I got a contract job. ... I started studying at a beauty school, because it was free of charge, but I didn't finish, because the school was expensive, you had to buy all the subjects for the profession yourself, a lot of study, and moreover, it was not in line with her interests, so I quit my studies. I concentrated on my work. In the sewing room, on a contract. (IDI/R4).

Such work is often low-paid so that young people without family support can only rely on themselves, and are hardly able to earn their living and their homes. Those young people who want a better standard of life are working longer and harder. Sometimes they also try to complete their education. Combining education with work in such a case is almost impossible, so they often give up education for work, which, however, it is not conducive to educational and professional success. Most of the foster leavers were earning money at the time of the interview, but fewer were working under a contract of employment, most were working part-time employment or on a side job, among them also on the black market. Those who are unsuccessful are more likely to reproduce dysfunctional life paths and to rely on social assistance.

c) Establishing one's own household and starting a family

The transition to 'making one's own nest' and starting a family is supported by the state in the form of resettlement allowance, monetary independence assistance and assistance with finding suitable accommodation granted to care leavers. Nearly every care leaver is eligible for financial assistance,

although in varying amounts depending on the length of foster care experience. Assistance with finding suitable accommodation is usually granted in the form of the right to use residential premises available from the municipality. In practice, this form of support causes several problems. The waiting time for a housing may take up to several years after the teenager reaches the age of 18. If a young person after reaching age of 18 continues education, s/he can stay in a foster care facility or find a place of residence on his/her own. As one of care leavers said:

For me, young people, if parents don't have to buy and give, or for example we have some grandmother, aunt, uncle who is not able to bequeath, well then young people from orphanages have no start and either by renting or buying their own flat. I don't know, there should be more support since our state wants us to stay here in our country and grow and have babies and everything…(R3/FGI1).

When the official decision is made and the right to residential premises is granted to a care leaver, further problems arise: such premises are usually located in disadvantaged neighbourhoods, the flats are very small and living conditions are very poor. The flat often needs major renovation that the municipality does not provide. Moreover, young people have virtually no furniture or necessary appliances. In case the independence assistance is granted prior to obtaining the right to a flat, the money is often already spent. As another interviewee said:

It's a start, but it's not for everyone. Let me tell you, when my son was two years old and I wanted to take up a job, go for an internship, they paid 500 zlotys [EUR 117], and I had to rent a flat by myself. At that time, the rent of flats was also 500 zlotys [EUR 117], a bit on the side, I don't know what the amounts are now, and I asked what I should do with this internship, with this amount. (R3/FGI1).

Care leavers tend to enter their first intimate relationships at the time of establishing their own household. These relationships often result in pregnancies, often prematurely and despite their poor financial standing, which further complicates their financial situation. The young people decide to start a family. In this way, two paths of the transition to family roles form. These paths are more often taken by young women (male care leavers assume occupational roles more often than new family roles). One of the paths is *reaching adulthood via parenthood*. Taking this path is related to idealisation by women of the role of the mother and results in their withdrawal from the labour market. Their source of subsistence is either the national Polish child benefit programme (EUR 117 per month per child) and other benefits or dependency on a partner. As some women told us:

I have always dreamed about starting my own family. I've always been the kind of babysitter, when new little kids came to the orphanage, they always got to me, under my wings, yes? Maybe because I didn't have a real family, I've always dreamed about this family of mine, these kids (...) at 17 I got pregnant, I had my first child. I really wanted it. I got the apartment very fast, because I was threatened by a single mother's house, so our director from the orphanage did everything he could to prevent this from happening (...) he knew that I would manage (...) I got independence assistance and resettlement allowance (...) I had to renovate the flat and the administration renovated it too, because I got my apartment completely burned down, so it was terrible, but it was the only available flat (...) it was 30 meters in total, where it was really such a big place (...) I really was lucky, and got a lot of money, really everything was a revelation. The neighbourhood was not safe, opposite the sobering room, but it was really great. (R7/IDI).

Another path of reaching adulthood is a '*heroic' combination of parental and other adult social roles*. Against the backdrop of modest support networks and low wages, this path is fraught with difficulties. However, it is a source of satisfaction related to being a fully grown-up, responsible and independent person who coped with the foster care past and achieved self-fulfilment. As some women told us:

> *I became a sales manager, after a year I became the manager of the whole restaurant, I met my current husband... We lived with our parents a bit before the wedding, then he went to the army (...) I was left alone again for a year. It was an attempt at survival. So I stayed at my parents' place (...) when I got married, we got this little 20-square meters flat. Room, kitchen, bathroom, fully loaded. There were plans that (...) when we work and I graduate, I'll get pregnant. But one day I went to work (...) and I broke my arm. I was made to write that it was my fault, because I had bad shoes. I came home, I was in my 4th year of college. . . I came home, told my husband, I don't know how you're gonna do it, but I'm not going back there. I said, I'm gonna finish this full-time study, but I want to get pregnant. (laughs). I was telling him we can do it, we can do it. To prove the whole family telling me that I cannot figure out studying and my new family, that I am not gonna graduate. So it was to prove to them .... but I was already five weeks pregnant. (R4/FGI1).*

> *After leaving the orphanage, I was afraid (...) I will not have a job, I will not find a job (...) I will have nothing to pay for (...) a flat, and when there is a flat, I will not be able to cope live alone, always in a group, always with someone, and then suddenly the man appears (...) It was so hard. Honestly, I was afraid that I would also fall into alcohol, like my siblings (...) I am fighting for an additional place, because I have difficult living conditions and I am afraid that they will take my child to an orphanage (...) When it was established on the social profile that I had finished school in the [educational] center they started to tease me (...) and I stopped my employment (...) instead of supporting us, they are killing us. I know that not everyone from an orphanage goes straight. Well, why measure everyone with one measure? (R3/IDI).*

Establishing a household and entering a parenthood are the most important markers of adulthood. For youth leaving foster care it happens relatively early in their biographies (especially taking into account their financial capabilities and employment situation) compared to their peers growing up, who at that time can explore intimate relationships, self-development and social roles. As a result, foster care leavers seem to be more (and earlier) adult, mature and independent. The fulfillment of family roles often gives meaning to the lives of these young people who themselves come from neglected families, and although the fulfillment of these roles can be heroic, these roles are most often fulfilled in accordance with social expectations.

6. Conclusions

The international trend (paradigm shift) of moving away from institutional forms of foster care towards a diversified range of family forms of care is taking place in Poland. More and more children who experience the lack of developmentally appropriate conditions in their birth families are placed in family foster care. Currently, three out of four Polish foster children are family foster children. Over the last three years, the share of family foster children in total foster children has slightly increased (from 77% in 2017 to about 78% in 2020). However, it should be emphasized that when the child comes to kinship foster care, grandparents or adult siblings often become foster parents, who do not usually guarantee a change in conditions for his/her development. The number of children who return to their biological

families from foster care is still relatively large, but it is slowly declining. In 2017 about 37% (GUS 2018a: 4, GUS 2018b: 2), and in 2020 35% (GUS 2020: 1, 2) of foster children up to 18 years old returned to their biological families, and among mature foster people about 20% and more than 17% returned, respectively.

The transition to adulthood from foster care is still highly institutionalized in Poland. The state promotes taking on adult social roles and leading an independent life by legal regulations and public policies (social policy, housing policy, labor market policy and family policy). The whole process of transition into adulthood is predicted in advance and designed according to a top-down scenario. The Polish foster care support system, reformed in 2011, aims at granting support to adult care leavers, regardless of the form of foster care in which they stayed that would enable them to function and to reach personal fulfillment on equal grounds with other young adults. The new system provides for various measures to help young people leaving foster families and institutions. Systemic solutions support the continuation of education, gaining professional qualifications, taking on jobs and owning a flat.

The research results, including those presented in the present article, show that everyday practice differs from the assumptions behind the law. Among young adult foster leavers are high school and even college graduates, people who work under a contract of employment and are developing professionally, and have already started their own families. However, only the most determined care leavers use the forms of support available to them successfully. These are more often care leavers who are already mothers, who are from less dysfunctional families and who ended up in foster care at a later age.

Legal solutions do not always combat exclusion of their beneficiaries, i.e., care leavers, but relatively often push them to the margins of society. The situation of foster care leavers is uncertain. Their relatively low level of education, lack of savings, difficult access to better jobs and their own premises are the scale of the difficulties they experience at the stage of becoming independent. The state that should support them in this process does not sufficiently satisfy the needs of the foster children who leave the family or institutional foster care. The allowance for further education is too low. Those who continue their studies usually have to work, which is not conducive to their successes in learning. It takes about three years from reaching the age of majority to obtain a flat from the commune, despite preferences for foster children on social housing lists. The received apartment is usually devastated, requires a thorough renovation, and has large financial outlays. The amount of money provided for in the act to support the self-dependent is inadequate to their needs (Wieczorek 2016: 308, 311-312). The identified paths of care leavers' transitions into adulthood reveal many obstacles they have to overcome. They also show that they are in different stages of adulthood. Most of them still struggle with adulthood, only a few, at the age of almost 30, become independent, combining family and professional roles.

Such an institutionalized process is counterproductive, because instead of equal opportunities it creates distance to care leavers 'peers. Foster care leavers do not enter adulthood on an equal footing with their peers; they cannot experience emerging adulthood as the life phase described by Arnett (2004).

Polish institutional foster care does not offer satisfactory support to young people who are aging out from foster care. Although there is a lack of comprehensive public policies in Poland targeted at young people reaching adulthood, those living with their birth parents feel that they have an opportunity and freedom to choose their own way of life (Kudlińska-Chróścicka 2019). On the contrary, young people who have less chance to be raised in their biological families and were deprived of the opportunity to draw on socio-cultural family capital at this milestone of life, are in a different situation. Although there exists a broad set of instruments of state support, implementation is flawed and care leavers are very

critical of them. The consequences of the foster care system's low effectiveness are mainly borne by the children, who grow up under conditions that limit their developmental opportunities since both institutional forms of foster care and kinship foster care do not properly prepare them for adulthood or competing with peers from well-functioning biological families. The lack of fulfilment of emotional, vocational, health-related, educational, cultural and recreational needs of children from dysfunctional families lies behind their unpreparedness for an independent and responsible life. In the light of own research, the Ward's argument (2008:261) that the state plays the role of a corporate parent to those children from neglecting environment has to be accepted. As she stated: "In many societies the state withdraws support for care leavers at an age when their peers might expect to receive continuing help from their families for several more years to come; in those societies where support is extended, it may be withdrawn abruptly, without adequate preparation for independence" (Ibidem). This description is also relevant to the situation in Poland where the abrupt withdrawal of support means that care leavers experience the processes of transition simultaneously, rather than sequentially. Young adults move from education to the labour market or from being dependent youth to premature parenthood at the same time as they move from a foster home into own household.

Some researchers state that analyses of foster care leavers are incomplete. They concentrate on the needs of these young people, their rights and the programs available to them (Pinkerton 2011; Lee and Berrick 2014). According to Pinkerton (2011: 2413) "they have tended to be descriptive rather than analytical or theoretical". Lee and Berrick (2014) underline that it is also important to analyse the ideas of planned and implemented changes in the organization of services for them. The current situation of foster care in Poland is complex. The reasons lie both in the ideological priority attached to a child's biological family and in the organisation of the foster care system, including the varying degree of effectiveness of caregivers in institutional care and family assistants. Insufficient attention is paid to the professional role of foster families. The quality of cooperation among all components of the foster care environment also raises concerns. Moreover, the public assistance system for foster care leavers provides for aid mainly in the spheres of parenthood and financially independence (being a worker). What draws attention is the low level of vocational education offered by employment agencies, relatively easy access to low-paid jobs, and high competitiveness of benefits for children in relation to these job offers. The state is therefore forcing these young people to quickly assume traditional social roles of low-skilled workers and non-working mothers.

Acknowledgements

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