

# EDUCATIONAL PATHWAYS AND THE INFLUENCE OF SOCIAL CONTEXT CONDITIONS ON EDUCATIONAL BIOGRAPHIES OF CARE LEAVERS

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Received: 30.5.2017.

Accepted: 3.11.2017.

Preliminary report

UDK: 376.1 (436)

**Abstract:** *In this paper we want to offer some initial insights into an ongoing study on the education and work situation of care leavers in Austria. We describe the transitional and educational situation of care leavers in Austria based on existing data. Then we explain the aims and design of the research project "Educational opportunities and the influence of social contextual conditions on educational biographies of care leavers". In a biographically oriented qualitative study, narrative interviews and network analyses are used to determine whether and how care leavers have been hampered in their educational pathways, what opened up the way for them and what influence social frameworks had on their educational biographies. Finally, we will outline some of the study's initial results based on the case example of "Chantal".*

**Keywords:** *Care leavers, educational biographies, qualitative research*

## INTRODUCTION

In recent decades, there has been a significant rise in the importance of formal educational and vocational qualifications when it comes to leading a successful, independent life. Educational opportunities are, however, spread among each population group in a socially unequal manner (e.g. see OECD 2014: 92; Schreiner 2013: 46ff.; Bruneforth et al. 2012: 199ff.). One group that has, as yet, attracted little attention in this context in Austria is that of "care leavers". Care leavers are defined as young adults who spent some time of their childhood and/or adolescence in residential or foster care and who moved on to adult life after leaving institutional settings (Thomas 2013: 12). There is not a single Austrian study on education that specifically examines this group's educational situation (e.g. see Bruneforth et al. 2016). Studies dealing with the education of children and young people in out-of-home care could provide one way of approaching care leavers' educational situation. International studies show that this group is at a

clear disadvantage when it comes to formal education (e.g. see OACAS 2011; Gharabaghi 2011; Köngeter et al. 2012). Moreover, no data have been systematically collected on this topic in Austria (e.g. see BMFJ 2016). There is thus little public awareness of the consequences of growing up in public care, with regard either to care leavers' educational situation or to their overall living situation. Therefore, the research project "Educational opportunities and the influence of social contextual conditions on educational biographies of care leavers" aims to gain some initial information on care leavers' educational pathways in Austria.

Against this background, we briefly look in this article into the specific transitional situation that occurs in care leavers' biographies and into the effect it has on their educational career. Then, we will present our research design for a qualitative, biographical study intended to gain insights into care leavers' educational pathways. One central focus will be on how social contextual conditions affect educational processes. Finally, we will out-

line some of the study's initial results based on the case example of "Chantal".

### Care leavers' transitional and educational situation: the Austrian context

One overarching finding from youth research is that young people are transitioning to an independent life later than earlier generations (see Sting 2011). The main reason for this is that educational pathways have become longer, reflecting more demanding educational requirements. Throughout Europe, this has led to young adults' living longer with their parents. In Austria, the average age of leaving the parental home changed between the early 1990s and 2012 from 21.8 to 26.6 among men and from 19.9 to 24.2 among women. At the same time, moving out is increasingly seen as reversible (cf. <http://de.statista.com> 2015). This transitional phase in early adulthood has become a separate stage of partial, to some extent precarious, independence (see Münchmeier 2005; Arnett 2000; Dreher et al. 2011; Sting 2011). On one hand it offers young people space to develop and test options for living their lives; on the other hand, during this stage, they frequently undertake continuing education, with varying levels of material, social and emotional support from their families of origin (see Großegger 2011: 200).

This is not the case for care leavers. Contrary to the case of adolescents living in families, in Austria the average age at which young people leave youth welfare has dropped. An internal study by SOS Kinderdorf shows that the average age at which they leave supported housing dropped from 19.0 to 17.2 between the periods 1993–1996 and 2009–2012 (Hagleitner 2015: 58f.). Moreover, according to the Austrian Child and Youth Care Law, care leavers are not able to reverse the process or return to residential care after leaving. Youth welfare services in Austria generally end at age 18. They can be extended to age 21 only if the young people succeed in meeting previously agreed support targets, usually completing school or vocational education courses. After leaving youth welfare, no specific support system or follow-up care for care leavers exists in Austria (see KJHG 2013).

As a result, young people in care are guided towards a low or mid-level qualification (com-

pulsory schooling and vocational training) to achieve financial independence early on. They have no space for experimentation, reorientation or long, risky educational pathways. This means they are structurally disadvantaged with regard to their potential education, income and employment opportunities (see Lassnig 2011: 138ff.). In many cases, youth welfare services end when they drop out of education. After completing initial school or vocational education, care leavers in Austria do not receive any specific advice, mentoring or formal support, which makes it extremely difficult for them to continue their education. While adolescents depend strongly on familial support in situations of this kind, it is unclear to what extent care leavers can rely on social support from their family or other informal sources.

Care leavers' specific transitional situation entails numerous disadvantages in terms of their formal educational outcomes, as international studies have shown. A UK study on the educational status of 19-year-olds who were looked after at age 16, for example, produced the following results: 33% of the group studied were not in employment, education or training; 6% were not in touch, and 6% were at university or in higher education. A striking educational disadvantage was revealed among care leavers compared with all 19-year-olds, 13% of whom were not in employment, education or training, and 38% of whom went to university (<http://www.gov.uk> 2011).

Altogether, there are thus signs that care leavers are disadvantaged in the field of formal education. This involves various overlaid forms of disadvantage. Buchner and Hagleitner, for example, ask whether this educational disadvantage is due purely to their disadvantaged origins, or whether the fact that they grew up in residential care itself plays a role (Buchner & Hagleitner 2014: 17). O'Higgins et al. show by an international meta-analysis that pre-care experiences like maltreatment or individual characteristics can also be responsible for a demonstrated achievement gap between young people in care and their peers (O'Higgins et al. 2015). Moreover, it is uncertain whether care leavers can to some extent compensate for a lack of educational qualifications in their life after being in care.

Despite care leavers' demonstrable educational disadvantage, some initial biographical studies from countries outside Austria have shown that the educational careers of young adults with experience of child and youth welfare do feature various kinds of social environments and contexts that promote education and offer resources and potential for educational success. The examples of care leavers who have achieved educational success indicate that formal educational success can provide qualifications for the labour market as well as play a central biographical role in shaping other aspects of their lifeworlds. Such educational success can help demonstrate "normality" by fulfilling normative social requirements; it enables care leavers to experience agency, self-efficacy and social recognition, and it gives them biographical continuity, providing a stabilising perspective (Köngeter et al. 2016: 106ff., 182).

## METHOD

These considerations formed the basis for the research project "Educational opportunities and influence of social contextual conditions on care leavers' educational biographies". The project began in April 2016 with the aim of gathering well-founded data, for the first time, on the educational situation of care leavers in Austria. It is known that the findings in the literature about care leavers can be generalised to cover multiple cultural contexts, but it is also important to note that the experience may also vary across the different child welfare systems (Rafaeli 2017). Therefore, we focus our investigation on educational pathways in the context of the Austrian child and youth care system. An in-depth biographical study is used to examine the interactions between the social contextual conditions affecting the way care leavers grow up and their educational biographies. The aim is to discover what hinders and helps their educational career. The study's target group is care leavers aged between 20 and 29 who have lived in one or more residential homes run by the child and youth welfare services in Austria. The participants chosen had at least two years' experience of child and youth welfare services and had left the system at the age of 16 at the earliest.

Data were collected using narrative thematic interviews (Witzel, 2000) supplemented by qualitative network maps (Hollstein, 2006). The overall research process involves a *reference group* (see Sigot, 2017) made up of young adults with experience of the child and youth welfare services, as a form of *participatory research* (see Bergold & Thomas, 2012/von Unger, 2014). A group of seven young people with experience of care are participating in the research process as *co-researchers* (von Unger 2014).

## Data collection

The interview participants were selected using the Grounded Theory approach (Glaser & Strauss 1990). In addition to the basic selection criteria (age between 20-29, at least two years of residential care experience in one or several institutions in Austria and leaving care after turning 16), we focused on criteria related to duration and number of settings outside of home care as well as on the criterion of regional location. Theoretical sampling was used to contrast the participants in relation to formal educational success and educational careers.

Participants were recruited in various ways: through personal contacts of the researchers, their colleagues and the co-researchers; at care leaver events; by postings on Facebook groups; at public institutions (e.g. street work, homeless facilities); and through voluntary contact from care leavers following media coverage of the research project.

The total duration of the interviews, including designing network maps, was between 70 and 170 minutes. The recorded conversations were transcribed in full and anonymised.

## Target group

A total of 23 interviews were held all over Austria. 12 of the participants were female and 11 were male; all of them were between the ages of 20 and 27. The length of their stay in child and youth care facilities was between 1 and 17.5 years<sup>1</sup> and they left care between the ages of 18 and 20. For four participants, assistance went on beyond

<sup>1</sup> During detailed narration of biography, it emerged in a few cases that the selection criterion "duration of care experience" was not completely fulfilled.

the age of 20, while three of them needed to get in touch with disabled assistance afterwards.

With regard to the context of origin, it can be said that the majority of the participants grew up in single-parent families, mainly headed by the mother. In almost all cases, alcohol dependency, mental health problems or disease were attributed to at least one parent. Violence was explicitly mentioned in only a few interviews, but traces of mental, physical and/or sexualised violence can be found in most. Furthermore, in almost all cases, there are clear indicators of poverty (e.g. single-parent household or low education, death or illness of biological parents).

Regarding the formal qualifications of the biological parents, only one parent has a higher education entrance qualification: almost all participants have parents with low qualifications. However, in the target group of care leavers, three young adults are in a bachelor's degree university program and one has already finished a bachelor's degree. Seven young adults have passed a higher education entrance qualification and two people are currently completing it via an alternative educational route. Eight people have completed one (or more) vocational training courses, and two of the participants have completed vocational training courses for special needs. Four young adults with less successful educational pathways have at least completed compulsory education, while one of them is working.

At this point it can be said that the young people have clearly exceeded their parents' level of educational attainment with regard to their formal educational biography. It becomes clear that our target group of care leavers is also part of the trend towards improvement in educational level seen throughout society from one generation to the next. However, a relatively straightforward, biographical educational pathway can be traced in only three cases. In the remaining cases there are breaks and extended school, education or training periods.

### Data analysis

The data are being analysed using the "documentary method" (see Bohnsack et al. 2007), which allows explicit and implicit statements to be linked

and different data sources to be included, which in this study are interview transcripts and network maps. The analysis aims to analyse biographical processes by means of case reconstruction as well as to create comparative types that can be used to generalise the individual cases.

Against the backdrop of the internal case comparison and cross-case comparison, we selected six contrastive cases during the research process, on which we worked intensively and which will be presented as case portraits in the project report. These portraits represent biographical pathways; they also characterise the main habitual orientations that are found through similarities in the empirical material. The remaining empirical material will supplement the types that we develop using a content analysis procedure.

## RESULTS

As the data analysis process is not finished yet, we can present only some initial results. By generating comparative types, we identified seven main orientation patterns that are expressed in various ways in the different cases. We labelled these patterns as follows:

- striving for "normality"
- being noticed
- desire for social belonging
- desire for self-responsibility, autonomy and sovereignty
- contenting oneself with a restricted social space
- de-dramatisation of the out-of-home-care experience
- overcoming restrictions.

In the following we use the case example of Chantal to demonstrate findings related to the orientation patterns of striving for "normality", being noticed and the desire for social belonging.

### Chantal's educational biography

Chantal, a name that the young woman in question chose herself, was 24 years old at the time of the interview and shared a home in another European country, where she works as second sous-chef in a restaurant.

During her childhood, Chantal attended a regular school. At the age of 13 she entered a child and adolescent psychiatric unit due to a suicide attempt and various behavioural problems, and she remained there for almost two years. During that time she initially attended a special needs school at the hospital; after problems arose in class, she was tutored individually in her room. After 1.5 years, an attempt was made to return her to her family, but this failed. At the age of 15, she was finally moved into social care in a group home, from where she began on the road to independence at the age of 18.5. After leaving residential care, she moved into a flat with her former partner and started working as a cook, before spending several seasons working in another European country. For some time now, she has been permanently employed and living there.

A description of her family of origin reveals an unusual family constellation. She grew up with her grandmother, aunts and cousins while her biological parents were absent. In her words, she lacked "warmth" and "interpersonal relationships"; she describes her mother as "asocial" and mentally ill. When she lived with her family, Chantal's attitude towards formal education was influenced by the perspective of her grandmother, who ensured that she always went to school. On one hand, Chantal sees the efforts her grandmother made as positive but, on the other hand, her grandmother tried to teach her behavioural norms regarding school that did not make sense to Chantal, or that she could not fulfil, as they did not fit the behaviour found in her family. This is how Chantal experienced the resulting discrepancy when she started school:

*"Yes, a lot of things were difficult for me when I started at school (...). Simply in, in terms of being too much for me, I dunno, of concentrating ... you're not prepared, right. (.) None of us. Like for me that was the biggest challenge going from home to school. Uh. (2) Real people, normal people, when they talk to you, you know." (Chantal, lines 662-668)*

Chantal experienced a gap between everyday life in her family and the behaviour expected of her in school. In school, she felt as if she was not normal, and tried using provocative behaviour to find creative ways of gaining social recognition

and esteem: she became the class clown. Chantal was involved in "all kinds of shit" in school, drank alcohol during class and clashed with teachers.

As she grew up, "a couple of incidents" also took place in her family, which is one reason, among others, why Chantal started "getting crazy". She experienced violence within her family, which led, at the age of 13, to extremely destructive and self-destructive behaviour and to her being excluded from school. Chantal hardly connects school attendance with educational aspirations at all; instead, she links it to her need for social relationships and social recognition, which were lacking in her family and which she was ultimately also not able to gain in school. These events built up into the feeling that a suicide attempt was her only way out.

During her time in the child and adolescent psychiatric unit, Chantal had no opportunity for formal educational processes. From her narrative, it becomes clear that her priority during that time was dealing with troubling experiences and struggling with herself. "Above all else it was really just important to understand myself, why I did that shit in the first place" (Chantal, lines 323–324). It was more or less impossible for her to meet the requirements of formal education. She explains this by saying "my head was different somehow. Occupied by that other rubbish, you know?" (Chantal, line 331).

In the group home, Chantal then evidently found a social environment that enabled her to have positive social experiences and where she experienced social esteem and recognition. It seems that, in the group home, she and her needs were noticed for the first time in her life, and that she found a place where she experienced social belonging as well as a framework for development processes. She judges the entire time at the institution to have been very positive: "actually better ... than all my childhood ... put together" and as the "best opportunity – like ... I actually had in my life" (Chantal, lines 190–192). In this case example, it should be noted that Chantal's positive assessment of the group home is to be considered in relation to her negative experiences in the system of origin and in child and adolescent psychiatry. The transition to the institution as well as the establishment of relations there was difficult for her, but she experienced in the group home a form of devotion that

she had never known before. The interview does not reveal the exact nature of this support, but it shows that her needs for making her own decisions were noticed for the first time. During her time in the group home, Chantal developed the direction of socially recognised normality, achieved through extreme effort and self-constraint. "Being normal" was of particular importance to her. In her understanding, it was the opposite of being stigmatised as "crazy" and being socially excluded. Striving for "normality" was Chantal's way of achieving social inclusion and leading a socially accepted life. She developed from a young woman clashing with life (suicide), people (violently, in interactions) and social norms, into a woman working hard to "be normal". The driving force behind this developmental step appears to be an interplay of different influences. These include:

- The social environment outside of home care, combined with learning the skill of entering into beneficial social relationships and -- through her social network of child and youth care workers, fellow residents, romantic partner, and others -- experiencing support and social belonging of a kind she did not have in her family.
- Success in formal education: she experienced power through gaining a school qualification and her positive experiences during the vocational training. "Good feedback" from her boss confirmed that she could "work well".
- The need to earn money and her uncertainty and fear of being left to her own devices after leaving care:

*"That I can live in a normal<sup>2</sup> way. Buy something I want every now and then. (...) I don't have, ... so many people that I can, you know, ask to help me if I really get in deep shit, you know. ... and you have to have some savings for those times, so that you can help yourself somehow, if you can't ask anyone else, you know." (Chantal, lines 128–136).*

- The fear of ending up on the street, getting into crime or drugs or being socially excluded:

*"Because, if I'd kept on that way at the time ... If I was like mixed up in that stage all the time and then left the group home at 18 or 19, then I would have*

*been alone. And if you just stay in the same track then you can see what comes of it. ... You're on the street. ... Can't get a foothold anywhere. Probably got a record and probably taking drugs. ... You know, I just didn't want to fall into a hole like that, along with all the others." (Chantal, lines 113–122)*

At first sight, Chantal's educational pathway moved in a positive direction, but looking back at her biography she realises that due to her life circumstances, she has not yet had any opportunity to make her own decisions about her schooling or occupation. "I never thought about my damned education... Like, I'd only have it at the age of, you know? 24 like. You want to do something else." (Chantal, lines 322–327). During the major changes and transitions from her family of origin to the psychiatric unit and later to residential care, Chantal did not think about what she wanted in the way of education, training and work. Her latent reflectiveness, scepticism and dissatisfaction with her success, and the idea that she could do something else, express the fact that Chantal's actions seem to be determined by others' expectations and external factors in people who act as her primary points of reference. For example, her grandmother, educators, and bosses, as well as the goal agreement within the framework of child and youth services and the institutional constraints of leaving care.

## CONCLUSION

The case outlined here illustrates the tension between educational disadvantages and beneficial social environments in the lives and educational careers of young people in residential out-of-home care. In Chantal's case, the time she spends growing up in her family is characterised by a lack of education, emotional neglect and troubling experiences. School is seen not as a personally relevant place of education but as the site of a precarious, ultimately unsuccessful search for social recognition among her peers. It is not until she enters supported housing that Chantal is able to have positive experiences of relationships, opening the doors to processes of informal and formal educa-

2 Chantal herself used the term "normal" during the interview very often.

tion. However, the orientation patterns regarding her educational prospects that have developed and that crucially affect the young woman's actions from that moment onward seem to be determined by the desire for social belonging, by the quest to be noticed and by striving for "normality" while fulfilling others' expectations. Chantal follows an idea of a socially accepted "*normal*" life, which in her view protects her from social exclusion and from the negative stigma of leaving care as landing "*on the street*".

"Normality" appears in various cases as an orientation pattern, a subjective concept that guides

people's actions during their life course and seems to enable them to avoid social exclusion and stigmatisation. Chantal's case is, in a sense, very particular, in that she describes a very positive experience of child and youth care. In most other cases the child and youth care institutions are badly criticised. In such cases we find that other social contexts such as schools, workplaces, peer groups or partnerships provide a positive sense of belonging and being noticed.

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## UTJECAJ SOCIJALNOG KONTEKSTA NA OBRAZOVANJE MLADIH KOJI IZLAZE IZ ALTERNATIVNE SKRBI

**Sažetak:** Ovim člankom željeli smo pružiti informacije o aktualnom istraživanju koje se bavi obrazovanjem i radom mladih koji izlaze iz alternativne skrbi u Austriji. U radu se na temelju postojećih podataka prikazuje tranzicija i obrazovna situacija ove skupine mladih, a zatim se daje prikaz istraživačkog projekta "Mogućnosti obrazovanja i utjecaj socijalnog konteksta na obrazovne biografije mladih koji izlaze iz alternativne skrbi". U biografski usmjerenom kvalitativnoj studiji korišteni su narativni intervjui i analiza mreža kako bi se utvrdilo je li i na koji način obrazovanje mladih koji izlaze iz alternativne skrbi bilo onemogućeno, što im je otvorilo put i kakav su utjecaj imale društvene okolnosti na njihove obrazovne biografije. Na kraju su prikazani početni rezultati istraživanja prikazom primjera slučaja "Chantal".

**Ključne riječi:** mladi koji izlaze iz alternativne skrbi, obrazovne biografije, kvalitativno istraživanje