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RISK IN THE BIOGRAPHIES OF INDEPENDENT CARE LEAVERS

Abstract. The article presents selected results of qualitative research indicating an attempt of self-construction by alumni of creating institutional and family forms of care in relation to experiences, autonomy and risk (including the risk associated with the COVID-19 pandemic). It appears that not the pandemic but adaptation to life outside institution affects the vulnerable life balance which, in light of lack of possibilities and resources necessary to overcome difficulties, sets the direction life course of the research participants. These difficulties lead to the implementation of certain functioning strategies which translate into life choices. The empirical data comes from quality in-depth interviews which make it possible to examine the world experienced and perceived by individuals.

Keywords: risk, biography, institution foster care leavers, quality research.

1. Introduction

Foster care leavers constitute a group that requires special attention. Even though foster care is more and more often mentioned in the public discourse, its voice focuses more often on foster family as the best alternative for upbringing children in need of support. This is undisputable. Less often we hear about adult leavers of both family and institutional care, requiring special support. If any, the message usually does not go beyond standard descriptions of dysfunctional behaviour.

It has to be emphasised that especially the leavers of institutional foster care are subjects functioning in the space of multi-dimensional risk. The latter is related to the trajectory experiences of being brought up in problematic families and in

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alternative to these forms of institutional care. It appears that the time of risk is not only the time of pandemic. In the first place it is the transition from the position of “a children’s home pupil”, to the position of an “autonomy person”. The change of status is associated with numerous difficulties that may cause numerous unwanted social consequences, including health ones. Struggles with everyday life seem to be constantly burdened by risk and require strategies that in case of foster care leavers are focused on survival. The subjective perception of risk by research participations is thus a permanent experience, inscribed in individual biographies.

The analysis focuses on individual histories, adaptation strategies and life choices of the research participants, undertaken both in the conditions of a pandemic and in the conditions of adaptation to life outside an institution. The article presents conclusions from research, conducted in the time of COVID-19 pandemic (May–July 2021) among adult foster care leavers who were or are the residents of the so-called training flat¹ in Lower Silesian Voivodship. As a part of the author’s own project in-depth interviews were conducted with young people aged 18–27. The conclusions from the narrative analysis suggest that one should look for an answer to the following question: How should we support the foster care leavers in order to reduce the feeling of risk and at the same time support them in recovering the ability to function in a society in accordance in line with society’s expectations of them fulfilling their social roles?

2. Theoretical and methodological basis for conducted research

The research of explorative and descriptive character was completed in a place well-known to the care leavers, i.e. in the training flat. The care leaver’s natural environment as space for gathering data encourages us to look for truth by being as close to the research participants as possible (Jemielnik 2012: 10). At the same time, it makes it possible to discover the perspectives of the research participants (Flick 2012: 35). Reaching the young people posed a great difficulty. Thus, in order to get to know and understand the world and way of constructing their fate by the research participants an attempt to “infiltrate” their natural reality was made. Exploration offers a possibility to get close to the world “distant” from the researcher’s subjective experiences, often heart-breaking but also focusing all attention on the reality which constitutes the context of human actions. At the same time, the reality in this perspective becomes an attributive construct of every research participants (see Blumer 2007: 34 n.). Thus, as theoretical basis for the conducted research the approach of symbolic interactionism was assumed since

¹ The training flat is an initiative of NGO aimed at supporting the care leavers outside the foster care system. The care leaver’s stay in the training flat is limited to maximally one year. What is important many care leavers reach the training flat right after leaving the care system, avoiding or suspending the status of a homeless person.

it focusses especially on meanings constantly awarded in the process of social interaction (Hałas 2006: 30).

The process of becoming independent is linked to the statutory transitions referred to in her post *A wobbly boat. The fate of alumni of care and educational institutions. Sociological analysis*, Agnieszka Golczyńska-Grondas (2016). This concept also appears to be useful for analysing the risk of independence faced by the interviewees.

Transitions to adulthood involve three transitions:

- (a) from the education system to the labour market (school-to-work-transition);
- (b) transition from the family of origin (including emotional family) to forming one's own family or stable relationship (domestic transition);
- (c) leaving the family home and looking for one's own (housing transition) (Skelton 2002: 101; after: Golczyńska-Grondas 2016: 28).

The researcher emphasises that the course of transitions into adulthood is subject to social control. The three transitions are model and duty. At the same time, those who are not able to meet these requirements are subject to pejorative social categorisation. Golczyńska-Grondas points to the social categorisation of unsuccessful transitions as retarded or maladjusted (Golczyńska-Grondas 2016: 28).

Importantly, categorisation begins the process of identity assignment. And the categories retarded or maladjusted contribute to the placement of the individual in the group of excluded or at risk of exclusion (Goffman 2007: 16). The structure of identity is also made up of life periods, such as the individual's background and the place in life that the person is currently in. Both factors influence the further functioning of the subjects.

One has to agree with Agnieszka Golczyńska-Grondas that the situation of a child in foster care differs significantly from that of peers from so-called good homes. The latter gain acceptance, economic and emotional support and the favour of their environment. The above-mentioned elements are social facilities that increase the possibility of fully functioning in society. Unfortunately, people in foster care experience a sense of rejection and lack of acceptance or respect. This lack of favour from the environment is described as a social handicap (Ziemska 1975: 14; see Wiktorowicz-Sosnowska 2020: 155).

Despite the fact that the researcher analysed the fate of adult wards in foster care between 1970 and 1990, the conclusions of the analyses cited in this paper in relation to the concept of transit are similar, although differences are also visible (Golczyńska-Grondas 2016: 87–110). Moreover, in order to emphasise the analytical usefulness of the concept, it is worth referring to the researcher's results by comparing them with her own results.

In both studies the basic form of transition was residential transit, which in relation to foster care wards became visible in the only pattern, which was "going nowhere".² Transition was associated with the need for the wards to leave foster

² The author of the notion of "independence to nowhere" is Agnieszka Golczyńska-Grondas.

care, usually when they reached the age of 18, without support from the institution's staff. In the analysed biographies, the respondents were saved by applying for a training flat, which was a transit route to a rented flat or involved returning to the family home (see Table 1).

Transitions from the education system to the labour market were unsuccessful for those interviewed. The educational level of the alumni was low. Similarly, as among those surveyed by Golczyńska-Grondas (2016: 100).

The analysis of the narratives indicated that no person had a regular source of income, which consequently translated into living, often in extreme poverty. Careers were not made visible, which is different from the researcher's analysis.

Transit to the family of procreation, confirms in both studies the pattern of bonding with a destructive partner, which is characteristic for the formation of relationships. This style in the case of analyses of foster care graduates concerns both young women and men. The results confirm the tendency to enter into relationships early noted by Golczyńska-Grondas (2016: 104).

The concept of transition requires a broader perspective that redirects attention to the nature of foster care support. The concept assumes that there is a transition from one state (relative acceptance of the family system/friendliness) to another. The latter should be a balance in the area of family, emotional, professional and living life. In the case of the respondents, difficulties in different areas of life may cause the individual to fail in his attempts to resolve them. Transitions are then made possible by the causal action of actors who are involved in strengthening the assisted person (Wiktorowicz-Sosnowska 2020: 153). Consequently, transitions require support.

In-depth, partially-structured quality interviews were used to gather the required empirical material. The interviews were recorded on a dictaphone and transcribed, taking into account non-linguistic communications and other interview elements, e.g. pauses or non-verbal expressions (Kvale 2011: 158). It was explained to the research participants that the recordings would be used solely for research purposes. Participation in the research depended on the care leaver's consent. The research participants were also informed that they could quit at any stage of the conducted studies. In the end, from among the persons staying in the training flat (permanently or temporarily) 10 adult foster care leavers participated in the research. In accordance with the rules of anonymization, the names of towns quoted in the article were concealed or replaced with others. Similarly, all personal details quoted in the statements were changed (Gibbs 2011: 38).

Due to the research problem and specificity of the group the selection of cases for study was of purposive character (Flick 2012: 62). In accordance with the principle of maximum contrast, the factors taken into account when selecting the sample included:

- experience of the research participants of staying in foster care;
- the situation of the research participants (current/past stay in the so-called training flat).

The selection of cases was preceded by numerous meetings aimed at the creation of relation based on trust and feeling of safety. During the meetings the researcher also offered workshops aimed at increasing the participants' competences and their level of social functioning.³ All-day meetings commencing early in the morning with shared preparation of meals, cleaning, spending time talking to the care leavers and playing with children, ending in the evening made it possible to see the everyday world of the research participants. This everyday life means basic reality, discovering both the possibilities and limitations, created during interactions but also well-known to the research participants (Berger, Luckmann 1983: 53). Finally, the researcher's participation in everyday reality of the care leavers gave an occasion to watch the process of creation and maintenance of intersubjective world of interacting persons and to learn the rules governing this world (see Schütz 2008).

The goal of the conducted research was to reach information regarding the care leaver's biographical experiences as of leaving foster care to the present. Also, answers to the question regarding the meanings awarded to own experiences were sought; reasons for leaving foster care; support from others; meaning of risk, including the pandemics and its impact on the care leaver's functioning. Great flexibility characteristic for qualitative research made it possible to reach required information by adapting to the circumstances. The research is based on biographic method assumptions, referring to events and motives placed in certain time frames, revealing the ways of interpreting these events (Flick 2012: 52; see Włodarek, Ziółkowski 1990). The article quotes only those fragments that refer to the title risk.

The research participants include adult foster care leavers aged 18–27, staying at present or that have stayed in the last two years, in the training flat. These persons are outside the foster care system since upon reaching adulthood they left institutional or family care. The flat in which they are currently staying is for them the so-called lifebelt saving them from homelessness or the necessity to return to dysfunctional family environment and at the same time a transit path to the world outside the system. Within the support during the stay in the training flat, the care leavers may benefit from the help of psychologists and part-time tutors. To a great extent, however, the idea of the place is based on independent functioning of the research participants, who as flatmates have to participate in the costs of their maintenance. What is important the care leavers create informal relations between them, from which the children living with them come. The socio-demographic

³ It should be emphasised that the double positioning of the author of the study did not involve any methodological or ethical dilemmas. In the first instance, workshops were conducted for those willing to participate. Interviews were conducted several months later. And the research participants were also people who did not participate in the workshops. In each case analysed, people made an independent decision whether they wanted to take part in the research. Some asked if there would be an opportunity for such a meeting again. Presumably, during the interview they satisfied their need to be heard and at the same time to be unappreciated by the author. They emphasised that they felt fully accepted; with their advantages and disadvantages.

characteristics of the respondents are included in Table 1 in the Annex. During the meetings in total eight children aged from 1 month to 3 years were present. Thus, an additional difficulty in the research was organising care for the minor children for the time of interviews with their parents.

3. Becoming independent and what's next?

In the Act on family support and foster care system a person leaving the foster family or all-day care facility upon adulthood is defined as a person who became independent.⁴ As long as they continue education (maximally up to 26 years of age) the care leaver is offered financial aid, help in finding employment, help in finding suitable housing (e.g. social housing), help for setting up (i.e. material aid) and also social work is performed for their benefit. In case of the research participants systemic support ended upon adulthood. With the exception of one person, others upon leaving the foster care ended their education. Thus, the systemic help offered in accordance with the quoted art. 140 of the Act on family support and foster care system ended. We may assume that as of the end of systemic support becoming independent is a form of institutional biography management (Golczyńska-Grondas 2014).

The independence is understood as a type of autonomy that according to Maslow is necessary for the individual's self-fulfilment. In order to reach a level of self-realisation individual basic needs should be realised. The realisation of needs can be disturbed by the family environment, which imposes its own perspective. Then the individual fulfils social expectations at the expense of his/her own needs. As a consequence, the individual may have problems setting boundaries towards life, the external environment and towards himself.

An independent individual in this perspective looks for a compromise between the requirements of their surroundings and their own needs (Maslow 1990). Independence is also associated with the independence of making life choices understood as the individual's right to self-definition (Obuchowski 2000). At the same time, it was assumed that independence is characteristic for persons aware of their choices and their consequences for which the person becomes responsible (Branden 1999). Being independent is often identified with adulthood. It has to be emphasised that a person is not born an independent individual. A person becomes independent in the process of upbringing, due to impact of others and in result of life experiences. Independence is identical with the process of becoming independent and thus preparing a care leaver to be independent. A characteristic

⁴ The Act on family support and Foster care system of 9 June 2011, Art. 140, provides in detail that an independent person is a person leaving foster care or all-day care facility upon adulthood. The care leaver upon completion of education (maximally up to 26 years of age) ceases to be a care leaver and becomes an independent person.

element of this process is a strategy of volitional promotion focused on the idea of autonomy expressed for example in the care leaver making independent decisions (Schaffer, Kipp 2015: 593).

It has to be emphasised that entering the world of adults associated with independent life decisions is always connected with certain difficulties, related to going through one's life stages but also with difficulties occurring in result of leaving foster care.

I have left children's home at 18 since I did not continue my education. A carer from children's home asked me where she should give me a lift to. I could not go back to my family, because my grandmother rented a small flat. Earlier I was with my grandma until I was 15. Grandma for health reasons simply gave us to foster care. I told her to give me a lift to my friends' place because three days before that I had learnt that I could not go back to my family home. Since then my adventures with drugs started [W1K].⁵

Numerous researchers emphasised that adulthood characterised by developmental tasks is burdened with threats but also chances resulting from the developmental cycle (e.g. Smykowski 2004; Brzezińska et al. 2015). Unfortunately, a special challenge is posed by entering adulthood for care leavers who have no support from their close ones. The world of their resources is limited mainly to the resources they took from foster care. Outside the foster care a completely different world appears: dangerous and often requiring immediate redefinition of life and its sense (Wiktorowicz-Sosnowska 2020: 151).

Leaving family or institutional foster care leads to the change of status. This is the period when fostering activities end. The change of status is often a transition from the level of dependence on institution to autonomy, which in the case of foster care alumni is not negotiable (Salazar et al. 2016: 264). Autonomy requires numerous skills which can prove to be a challenge for young adults. Unfortunately, the transit may have different dimensions for care leavers: positive or negative (Wiktorowicz-Sosnowska 2020: 153). Thus, it may cause joy but also if one's chances for dealing with life's difficulties are judged to be insufficient, it can cause disappointment, anger and sorrow. Young care leavers in the process of transition from institutional care are confronted with the compulsion or necessity to perform the tasks of autonomy living (Strauss 2012: 532–533). These moments require special support and in case of their lack may lead to biographical trajectories.

I went to children's home at the age of 11, because my biological father raped me. We were taken, I was there for a year. Then I went to a foster family until I turned 18. It was not ideal because it was pathological family. They just had money from us. Police interventions occurred often. At 14 I started taking psychoactive drugs, everything, apart from heroin. We had no support. I was raised by the street. I do not know what home, love, and support mean [W2K].

⁵ The symbols next to quoted narratives mean: W – interview, digit – interview number, letter – sex: K – female, M – male.

The data indicate various life problems upon leaving the foster care system. These include problems with: finding a flat, unemployment, poverty, health, lack of support or addictions (Curry, Abrams 2015; Verulava, Dangadze 2021). Due to life difficulties and lack of support care leavers are exposed to the loss of health and psychophysical condition.

The statutory requirements posed to adult foster care leavers refer to many skills which are characteristic for independence. These are, for example, functioning in labour market, possessing social skills, mostly regarding the knowledge about safe relations, safe place of stay and protection of one's own health. These are also areas verified by social workers in environmental interviews. Failure to satisfy the requirements means lack of independence.

It is worth emphasising that the predictor of independence should become the care leaver's conviction about internal centre of control that is noticing the relation between actions and achievements (Drwal 1995). Unfortunately, in case of care leavers: lack of support, family and material resources, burden with suffering trajectory and insufficient possibilities to deal with difficulties become a barrier on the path to satisfying numerous needs.

Referring to the question in the title of the subsection, it has to be concluded that institutional support is largely limited as it focuses mainly on legal-material security. The ineffectiveness of systemic actions in the process of becoming independent is related for example to the lack of periodical assessments of the care leaver's independence and his/her resources and possible difficulties in the basic areas of everyday life. Chapter 4 of the Act on family support and foster care system has to be pointed out, since it refers to the assessment of the situation of a child placed in the system. In particular Art. 129 and Art. 136, which point to the purposes of assessments, do not include the level of resourcefulness and independence and thus the possibilities and limitations of the care leaver's functioning in the future. Another issue is that the Act's provisions refer to the assessments of a child, i.e. a person under 18 years of age. In consequence the burden of responsibility for becoming independent, upon reaching borderline adulthood, is shifted to the care leaver. And then, as in the case of the research participants, the care leavers may rely solely on themselves.

I went to children's home only because there was alcohol at my home, it happened they hit each other. I wanted to separate them but usually I would land on a chair. And then one day the District Family Support Centre came and took us from school and we went to a family children's home. It was difficult to get used to it at the beginning but I managed. I was there for 11 years. I remember it fondly but I turned 18 and I had to leave. Maybe not necessarily here (the training flat) but thanks to it I avoided wandering [W7K].

It is important for the assessments to be completed at every stage until the care leaver decides to leave the foster care system and even in the period after leaving the care system, i.e. within a one-year grace period which might have a prophylactic role. At the same time, the assessments are necessary to offer support in reply to the care leaver's individual needs. Financial aid for becoming independent is not

the same as reaching independence by the care leaver and does not guarantee his/her success in dealing with life difficulties. In light of the listed doubts the title question “What’s next?” remains open. The reply to it is difficult since it requires multi-dimensional analyses of the care leavers’ life situation but also support and cooperation from the social support system. The question indicates the direction of further reflection over the perspectives, including the resources of care leavers and limitations and undoubtedly requires thorough insight from social services into individual biography of each individual.

4. Risk in care leavers’ life and narratives

In his definition of risk, Beck indicates that a person lives in a society of risk for which the problem is functioning in a new, changing reality (Beck 2002). The impossible to predict consequences of both individual and social actions become the risk. The risk is also associated with the state of awareness which sets the direction of individual’s thinking (Giddens 2006). Aware of threats the individual may reach the state of safety. They may also normalise situations which used to be risky under the experience of a crisis (Giddens 2006: 247). And this unfortunately may contribute to the deepening of individual drama.

The risk categories characteristic for the group of independent young people refer in the biography to several important areas of life which require support.⁶ The most desirable form of support is help in the area of striving for own flat. This is an area which is not stable because as a result of the lack of own place it creates the greatest risk of degradation in other dimensions of life. Risks also appear in the area of the labour market (employment), as well as the related lack of skills to manage a budget. Shortcomings concern the lack of knowledge of the local labour market, i.e. job centres or access to job offers. Also deficits in the ability to present oneself in front of an employer and the knowledge of how to prepare application documents become a problem, but also the low level of education of the respondents. Importantly, the conditions that the labour market places on a potential employee can be a serious barrier to the professional activity of people coming from foster care.

A very important area is the dangerous relationships that young people get into. This is related to the need for acceptance and belonging to a family or group. As a result, young offspring stay in relationships even when they are harmful to them.

⁶ The results concerning the areas of support for those who become independent and the threats resulting from the failure to meet these areas come from qualitative research (85 individual interviews) conducted in August–November 2017, which was used to develop a programme for the development of foster care in the city of Wrocław: http://wrosystem.um.wroc.pl/beta_4/webdisk/196483/1209ru07z.pdf (accessed: 27.08.2022). Data analysis was also included in Wiktorowicz-Sosnowska (2020).

Young people in foster care are burdened with unfinished legal matters. These include, for example, debt settlement, tenancy issues, maintenance payments to parents, or legal issues concerning parental rights to their own children.

The risk of being brought up in a deprived environment should be borne in mind. Disturbances in the area of socialisation, present in biographical experiences such as: emotional deprivation, violence, addictions maintain the transmission of poor (including unfavourable) patterns, the influence of which often determines the place of an individual in the structure of “social inequality” (Szacka 2008: 309). The aforementioned areas of risk typical for the collective of empowered alumni can also be found in studies by other researchers: Monika Sajkowska (1999), Marta Abramowicz, Anna Strzałkowska and Tomasz Tobis (2012) and Agnieszka Golczyńska-Grondas (2016).

What is interesting, the risk defined by the care leavers usually acquires a different meaning when they relate it to the pandemic than in case of individual biographical experiences. The COVID-19 pandemic is undoubtedly a factor that disturbed the internal balance of societies, bringing insecurity and numerous health, legal, social and psychological consequences. The statutory solutions aimed at the limitation of disease spread introduced restrictions and accompanying fear and insecurity. They affected also the scope of human freedom in various areas of life.

In case of the research participants a perceptible change in their functioning caused by the pandemic was a temporary loss of contact with their own children, often in foster care. And in consequence the pandemic was identified with the risk that a child in result of lack of relation will fail to recognise the parent.

Yes, there were restrictions, then I had no contact with children due to COVID [W1K].

But... no, only the little one, because I have not seen him because the ladies from the District Family Support Centre did not agree to holidaying. This hurt me the most, because I have not seen him for a long time. I was afraid he would forget me [W2K].

In light of difficulties that the care leavers have to deal with in everyday life the pandemic has no greater significance. To such an extent that they start to doubt the existence of the disease.

A lot has changed, masks, wearing mask while pregnant. I had to leave a shop because I almost fainted. Even drinking did not help. I had to leave and breathe fresh air. Also, I did not care that I had to wear a mask. They were only scaring us. I was not ill and the whole disease was a scam [W6K].

I do not care about the pandemic. I will get ill one day. Whether it is sooner or later I do not care. In any case I am getting vaccination on Tuesday, so. My life is more of a risk [W4M].

The pandemic did not turn the care leavers' life “upside down” for a few reasons. Probably the results of pandemic were not severe enough for the research participants to cause any disruption of balance in their lives. Certain areas affected by the consequences of pandemic did not concern the research participants directly

and thus were not the object of their direct care. Such an example is the professional sphere. No significant change in the organisation of the care leavers' everyday life occurred, even more so of mutual relations which were maintained in the internal, inaccessible to others world created by the care leavers. The research participants also do not mention experiencing fear about life or health in result of getting COVID-19, assuming more indifferent attitude towards possible illness.

A different meaning of risk is awarded by the research participants to their own experiences. The care leavers' entering the path of independent life is associated with risk which is identified with numerous factors. The research participants live in difficult conditions. No care leaver has a permanent place of residence which would give a feeling of safety and at the same time would allow them to take a break when looking for their own path. It is similar in the area of employment. Only two care leavers have part-time jobs at present. The care leavers who are mothers maintain themselves and the children from the 500+ benefit, family benefits and in certain cases alimony from biological fathers of the children. Deprivation is also visible in the context of education or social insurance. Four care leavers have no access to health benefits. In consequence young care leavers are in a constant "journey" which has no clear end. What is more, not only the journey but also its goal become impossible to predict in light of life deficits.

The lack of certainty and agency in one's life is associated with shifting the liability for one's fate onto others. The care leavers remain dependent on others, yielding control over their lives. Goals achieved by them are treated as a result of chance or fate (Rotter 1990). Usually such persons feel vulnerable towards live events. Thus, they do not undertake any initiatives meant to change their situation. In consequence subordination or passivity occur. What is important, the instability, the lack of feeling of certainty and safety set temporary character of the biography which increases life hopelessness and demotivation. It is not a linear process but a circular one, it may increase problems and thus increase risky behaviours.

The definition of risky behaviours refers to actions whose consequences are damaging to the physical and mental health both of the individual and their surrounding's (Kazdin 1996). These include: early alcohol, drug and sexual initiations, aggression or criminality.

The opposite of temporariness is continuity which fosters predictability and stabilisation. The continuity creates the feeling of individual's hope for a better life, activates resources and motivation. This is related to the feeling of safety.

The lack of stability which is characteristic for the research participants may lead to escapist attitudes (Tarkowska 1992: 29). The avoidance mentioned here assumes various forms, from withdrawal, ambivalence to rebellion and aggression, and even escape into addiction. We have to, however, emphasise that avoidance may be also a result of suffered traumas in relations with biological parents which in case of the research participants are of significance for their future functioning (Taylor 2020). Trauma and accompanying it trajectory of suffering from the past become a crucial risk factor for the future biography of the research participant.

Growing up in a dysfunctional family affects the functioning of every person. In the available research results analyses the impact of family environment on asocial child behaviour can be observed (Crick, Dodge 1994; George, Main 1979).

In accordance with this assumption a certain situational context or stimulus when associated with symbolically undesired behaviours are sufficient to cause a similar reaction in a child (Berkowitz 1989). Social environment (including family) is a space in which today's adults – models – become also teachers of children's negative behaviours (Bandura 1971).

The consequences of growing up in depraved environment are deeper. In result of bad treatment from the closest persons the care leavers have emotional difficulties expressed in anger or fear. Their cognitive functioning is also disturbed (Lipowska-Teutsch 1995; Herman 2004; Miller 2006; Miller 2007). Thus, the consequences may be short-term and remote in time. They refer not only to mental reactions but translate also into peer relations characterised by distance or avoidance of interpersonal contacts (Bragiel 1996). In consequence they may also affect the process of becoming independent and functioning in adulthood.

In case of the research participants a half of them had suicide attempts, problems with drugs, problems with law. Almost all persons had dramatic experiences related to alcohol intoxication. Eight care leavers experienced homelessness and wandering. In different points of their biographies the moments of hopelessness appeared and the dependence related thereto, being a part of everyday life trajectory, set by further ups and downs.

[...] when I was pregnant with Ala I had no place to stay. I lived in an allotment with my boyfriend, at his allotment. He helped me but there were moments when I had nothing to eat. I applied for a placement in this intervention one. They told me there were no premises for this, that is why I went to late care [...]. I asked them, crying, to allocate anything to me, because I was pregnant and I had no idea what to do next. Then they allocated me to a facility. Later when my due date was getting closer of course I could not stay there any longer so I called the single mother house. I was there for a while [WIK].

They brought me up all my life, but it was not too great at home. I respect most my grandmother, she was normal and grandfather as I always say only thought about drinking, benders, always something wrong, arguments. In the end one would always get provoked, these were stupid actions later there were blue cards, police. [...] My daddy, was in prison. He got eight, ten years, well you do not get conviction for nothing. My mum was in Italy. She went and I stayed in Poland. Then the grandparents became my foster family. I had to move out. At home there were persons who conspired against me a bit. So I simply left the house. [...] Of course it was not easy. I spent time in some homeless people houses, shelters, in forests, stops and all [W4M].

An important risk factor are the moments of transition, the so-called turning points, which undoubtedly include leaving foster care and starting independent life, but also moving pupils within foster care.

The listed issues associated with the risk of deepening biographical trajectories point one's attention to three dimensions of risk exposed in the narrative analysis.

On the one hand this is the individual dimension which is composed of dramatic events from the past, their consequences in the form of behaviour disruptions, and even personality disorders or genetic diseases. On the other hand, there is the social dimension characterised by constraints and institutional requirements. These include social interactions, also with significant others (Mead 1975: 224), social adaptation (Larson 1993: 287), social roles (Erikson 2000: 251) and social support (Hobfoll 2006). In the central point, overlapping both above dimensions, there are biographical choices. Burdened by individual and social factors they create a cumulated dimension of maintaining “chaotic” biographies. For the research participants the risk becomes a permanent experience, inscribed in their individual trajectory. The care leavers indicate the subjective meaning of what is risky in their lives.

When identifying the risk narrative certain segments were distinguished. They include certain thematic sequences which brought the researcher closer to the experienced world and made it possible to understand the risk and meanings it assumes for individual existences. In result of the analyses certain categories were separated which are the basis for the analysis of the research participants. The study will present only those categories which refer to the defined risk. These include: life outside the norm, dependency and escape.

4.1. Life outside the norm

The motifs of care leavers’ experiences categorised as “life outside the norm” refer mostly to experiences from not so distant past whose consequences undoubtedly affect the present lives of the research participants. The care leavers, however, create a clear temporal border between what happened in their lives and what is now and what will be. Maybe this is a kind of attempt at disconnection of behaviours defined as risky from their consequences and from self-defining in pejorative categories. Clearly, the future-oriented perspective causes the greatest uncertainty and is associated with the feeling of unpredictability of life.

The risk related to life outside the norm refers to behaviours which indicated problems in adaptation to functioning in the society. These are behaviours related to the violation of law, such as burglaries or theft, which apart from the legal consequences for the care leaver also have social consequences. In the literature these are defined as harmful behaviours leading to destruction (Podgórecki 1969: 25). They are often accompanied by alcohol or psychoactive drug addiction.

I do not have this risk zone. I used to. The risk, that I did everything to somehow maintain myself. I had such friends that I could not organise it all somehow. This life. Such a mess, well. Drugs surely were risky, often it was that it was really bad. Friends the same, or the theft, it was also risky. When I had nowhere to go I would break into a summer house. It was also risky. Many, many things like that [WIK].

There is always risk, there are ups and downs. I used to do things like that for a long time, theft, I would go and steal, initiate it. I do not want to be in touch with people who take, because

when one smokes in my presence, I never smoked, so this is not attractive for me. But if one takes heroine in my presence, I do not know if I will not do it. There is such a risk that I do not want for now [W2K].

It is important to emphasise that in none of the analysed cases of persons employing the “outside the norm” life strategy, retrospection was associated with auto-reflection about the consequences for one’s life. The research participants, by assuming passive attitudes, looked for justifications. Thus, they did not bear responsibility for their own conduct. At the same time, the lack of insight into one’s own experiences (see Schier 2021) and pointing to those guilty for their fate are associated with clear dependency of the research participants on the external world (Drwal 1995). Consequently, research participants adopt an attitude of non-culpability, remaining in the vortex of a biographical trajectory. What is interesting, the correlations available in the literature indicate a relation between the external feeling of control and creation of the feeling of lack of impact on the events, which in consequence leads to self-taught hopelessness (Seligmann 2011). Such persons are not independent in making decisions, they do not have a big need for achievements which would be a driving force to action and change of biography (Sęk 2007). Recalling after Branden that independence identified with adulthood is expressed in conscious, autonomous decisions and responsibility for their consequences (Branden 1999), we may conclude that the care leavers lack this characteristic. In result, the research participants reproduce the models known to them from childhood characterised by lack of personal borders, disappearance of responsibility and even violation of personal rights (Ryś 1998; 2011).

4.2. Remaining in dependency

The second analytical category referring to “dependency” is connected with individual factors such as feeling of control location, as mentioned before, but also with social factors, intensifying biographical trajectories. The narratives contain statements in which an individual says about dependent on others, mainly institutions, in which it stayed or relations with others. In the first case, the risk was identified with the anticipated change of status, loss of previous place of stay, that might contribute to the disruption of life and lead to the loss of feeling of stability associated with securing a shelter. Thus, the loss may cause a threat of homelessness. It is worth emphasising that homelessness is the most difficult manifestation of social exclusion (Czapiński 2005: 278). And in connection with poverty and life marginalisation it creates a triad dangerous for further existence of the research participants (Grotowska-Leder 2002: 273–274).

The risk is that once I leave here I will have no money and anything, no money at all to, I do not know, to rent a flat, to have a roof over my head. The risk is also such that I may end up in the streets. And I would not want that. That is why I am trying to study as much as I can. I do not want to but I have to. This is the risk for me [W3M].

The dependency understood that way becomes a biographical compulsion which to a certain extent protects against the consequences of social exclusion. This compulsion is expressed in staying in the care of supportive institutions or in returning to these institutions such as a training flat. The compulsion implies a loss of autonomy and independence and the need to conform to institutional rules.

Dependency is also related to the need to stay in a relationship with a partner and identified in the category of lack of life agency when living alone. The meaning of risk is interpreted by respondents only in case of having children. This is the risk of being a single parent which is also associated with the responsibility for upbringing minors. What is interesting, the risk does not appear and is not defined in the context of individual's danger to self. Even when they talk about their adventures with alcohol, they emphasise that it is not a threat to their lives. In case of having children, being in a relation and dependency becomes a strong need for young mothers. Even when the relation is failed and the woman experiences humiliations. A relation makes it possible to distribute the responsibility for upbringing to two partners. The risk is the loss of relation. It has to be added that the risk of loss of relation is associated with the attempt for self-categorisation in pejorative dimension. In the narrative one can see the lack of faith in one's abilities, low self-esteem and making educational successes dependant on a partner. This is an example of placing control outside an individual and affects his/her self-definition in a category of helpless, weak. Looking for empowerment and resources outside the narrator leads to helplessness towards life events (Pervin 2005: 86).

The risk was that I would be alone and fail to manage to take care of a sick child. I was afraid that I would not be able to look after three [...] and for the two years of my alcoholism there was no risk. I did not have children, who I would risk for, unless I would drink myself to death. But I was not this kind of alcoholic, from morning to night. I drank only in the evenings. I did not have to take care of anybody. I could go to sleep [W6K].

4.3. Escape

This category has three dimensions. Firstly, the escape refers to detachment from persons identified as encouraging to unacceptable behaviour and thus threatening one's functioning. In this meaning, the others pose risk for the research participants.

[...] I moved away from such persons. I do not live at my place in the city but here (place) so I do not have contact with such persons [W2K].

Secondly, the escape appears in a situation when the narrator becomes a victim of. Thus experiences of suffering and violence, usually from the partner, who is a threat to the care leaver but also to her children.

I was in an abusive relation. If I stayed with my boyfriend I do not know how it would end. It was a risk. They could take my child away. I left him [W5K].

Thirdly, the escape is also an attempt to end one's life. In case of lack of feeling of stability and loss of hope for improving one's life, suicide thoughts or an attempt to end one's existence are to contribute to the elimination of suffering (Aronson et al. 2004: 260). The lack of acceptance of one's fate in an extreme form constitutes withdrawal from life (Merton 1982: 248).

Also, a risk is sleeping at stops, when it really was that it was cold and in general of course it is better at home, in bed. [...] There were moments that I wanted to freeze, that when I had something to drink, or something I wanted to freeze, to end it all [W4M].

I wanted to swallow some pills and wash it down with alcohol. But I did not take them. I had such thoughts but concluded that there was still a lot ahead of me [W6K].

Every dimension was characterised by the experience of affect, such as fear. It was fear of homelessness, violence and also loss of life.

The undertaken attempts to define life risk by researchers indicate two mental worlds in which they balance, choosing concepts of themselves. One choice is to make an effort to adapt to the reality, which is characterised by functioning in accordance with applicable standards. On the other hand, the choice encourages to escapist behaviours through addictions and auto destructive decisions. The third choice is an attempt to exist in both realities at the same time (Oettingen, Thorpe 2006 after: Bańka 2009: 336).⁷ None of the possibilities give a guarantee of creating a consistent and stable concept of oneself. The first world, even though desired, usually is not internalised to such an extent as to protect an individual against world's temptations. In consequence, the care leavers remain in the so-called trajectory potential loop which is known to them from childhood experiences (Schütze 1997: 24; see Wiktorowicz-Sosnowska 2015). Thus, the past trajectory extends to present life and leads to the destabilisation and multiplication of everyday problems.

5. Conclusions

An attempt to present and describe the reconstructed concepts of oneself by foster care leavers was aimed at bringing the reader closer to the world of experiences and biographical dramas by indicating the dominant role of the risk.

It has to be articulated that leaving the care leavers dependant on the social support system which performs a control function for them, does not exhaust the characteristics of necessary support. The care leavers become elements of a broader system, subject to institutional, previously set models of behaviour which are important for their functioning and independent choices. On the one hand, such

⁷ The idea to divide the reality into three areas based on which an individual creates concepts of oneself is taken from Oettingen and Thorp (2006) after: Bańka (2009) but virtual reality was replaced with escape into addictions.

anchoring may affect the dependency on the source of support. However on the other hand, the planned character of institutional support often fails to take into account the individual needs of care leavers and in consequence it may lead to the withdrawal of young adults from the possibility to benefit from the available resources even when they need it. Also, when recurring life events (addictions, conflict with the law, homelessness, lack of support) cease to affect an individual, then adaptation to conditions that an individual is exposed to takes place (Brickman et al. 1978). This may be associated with avoidance style and even self-taught hopelessness. It can be depicted by relations of dependency, life decisions or escapist behaviours to which the research participants award the meaning of risk. As it appears the risk defined in relation to biographical difficulties is experienced as greater threat than the COVID-19 pandemic. In light of the above the process of becoming independent becomes especially important, particularly when it becomes a priority to counteract social exclusion.

The recalled analyses encourage a conclusion that preparation to independence requires knowledge and understanding both in the area of life experiences of the care leavers' functioning and individual needs. It is also important to take into account the context in which the care leavers are at present. Thus, research conducted in this area should include the broadly understood external (situational) and internal (e.g. related to personality) factors.

Annex

Table 1. Characteristics of study research participants in foster care

| Interview number, sex and year of birth | Education/training | Marital status, family procreation | Source of revenue | Place of residence | Foster care |
|---|-----------------------------|--|--|--|--|
| W1K, 1997 | middle education | single/cohabiting relationship, 3 children (two of them in foster care) | alimony, social benefits | previously a training flat/currently a rented flat | from 6 to 15 years of age – in kinship care (with grandmother), then until 18 years of age in institutional care (DD) |
| W2K, 1994 | gymnasium education | single/cohabiting relationship, 2 children (one of them in foster care, currently with mother) | alimony, social benefits | previously a training flat/currently a rented flat | from the age of 11 for a year in institutional care (DD), then until the age of 18 in a related RZ (with the mother's sister) |
| W3M, 2003 | attends primary school | single | money to continue education from the OPS | training flat | from age 7 to 18 in RDD |
| W4M, 1999 | gymnasium education | single | none (looking for a job) | training flat | he does not remember since when he was placed with a related RZ (grandparents); he informs that "his grandparents raised him all his life" |
| W5K, 2000 | vocational education (cook) | single/cohabiting relationship, 1 child (family under guardianship – suspected child abuse) | alimony, social benefits | previously a training flat/currently a rented flat | from 11 to 18 years of age in institutional care (DD) |

| | | | | | |
|------------|-----------------------------|---|--|---|---|
| W6K, 1993 | primary education | single/cohabiting relationship 2 children (including one with cleft lip and palate); family under the care of a family assistant | alimony, social benefits | previously a training flat/currently a rented flat | she ran away from home before the age of 17 and was placed in institutional care before the age of 18 |
| W7K, 2003 | vocational education (cook) | single | money to continue education from the OPS | training flat | from age 7 to 18 in RDD |
| W8K, 1989 | middle education | divorcee 2 children, living with father due to mother's alcohol addiction (mother in treatment) | contract work | previously a training flat/currently rents a room | from 15 to 18 years of age in institutional care |
| W9M, 2000 | primary education | single | casual work | previously a training flat/currently back to biological parents with alcohol addiction problems | from 12 to 18 years of age in institutional care (DD) |
| W10M, 1999 | gymnasium education | single/cohabiting relationship 2 children (including one with cleft lip and palate); family under the care of a family assistant | casual work/ social benefits | previously a training flat/currently a rented flat | from 10 to 18 years old in institutional care (DD) |

Source: own study.

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RYZIKO W BIOGRAFIACH USAMODZIELNIONYCH WYCHOWANKÓW PIECZY ZASTĘPCZEJ

Abstrakt. W artykule zaprezentowano wybrane wyniki badań jakościowych wskazujących na próbę konstruowania siebie przez wychowanków pieczy instytucjonalnej i rodzinnej w relacji do doświadczeń, samodzielności i ryzyka (w tym ryzyka związanego z pandemią COVID-19). Okazuje się, że nie pandemia, ale adaptacja do życia poza instytucją wpływa na stan chwiejnej równowagi życiowej, która przy braku możliwości i zasobów niezbędnych do poradzenia sobie z trudnościami wytycza kierunek dla prawdopodobnej biografii jednostek badanych. W konsekwencji trudności uruchamiane są strategie funkcjonowania przekładające się na życiowe wybory. Dane empiryczne pochodzą z jakościowych wywiadów pogłębionych, które umożliwiają badanie sposobu doświadczania i postrzegania świata przez jednostkę.

Słowa kluczowe: ryzyko, biografia, wychowankowie instytucjonalnej pieczy zastępczej, badania jakościowe.