Young adults leaving care : Agency and educational choice

Kulmala, Meri

Chapter 10

Young Adults Leaving Care: Agency and Educational Choice

Meri Kulmala, Zhanna Chernova, Anna Fomina

Introduction

Young people's transition to adulthood is generally considered to be a pivotal window of both opportunity and vulnerability in terms of their future life. This is especially true when it comes to the particular group of young people under our investigation: young people leaving care. Their journey into adulthood is 'both accelerated and compressed' (Stein 2006: 274). It has been noted (Hiles et al 2014: 1) that care leavers 'undertake this journey against a backdrop of difficult life experiences, sometimes amidst unsupportive family relationships and, and with little time to allow psychological adjustment to these changes'. 'They make the transition to independent living far earlier and more rapidly than their peers generally without the option to return,' the authors continue. If more generally the literature on youth-adult transitions now speaks about yo-yo transitions, meaning that these transitions have become less linear, more complex and also reversible (Biggart, Walther 2006), young adults leaving care might not have a place to return to. Thus, they might have fewer chances to 'make mistakes' in making decisions and choices concerning their later life, including their education and future profession.

According to the widespread notion of the typical educational trajectories of children deprived of parental care, these children globally face problems in learning at school, show low motivation to receive education and have low grades, which significantly limits their access to higher education and, consequently, might lead to employment in low-prestige and low-paid sectors (Arnau-Sabatés, Gilligan, 2015; Hiles et al. 2014; Pinkerton, Rooney 2014; Stein 2006; Törrönen et al.

2018). Many countries have proceeded with efforts to improve the quality of care in order to promote better social inclusion of this specific group of young people. The development of after-care services is also in the essence of the Russian recent child welfare reform (Chapter 4 by Kulmala et al. in this volume). In the Russian context, this group of young people is of particular interest, since, on the one hand, it is considered to be a low resource, excluded from the general Russian trend of people getting higher education, while the prestige of secondary education is declining (Walker 2012). On the other hand, they are provided with a rather large package of state support, including an opportunity for professional education, both secondary special and higher. At the same time, the forms of support provided are not always effective in terms of overcoming stigma and social exclusion (Ilyin 2015).

This chapter analyses the educational strategies of young people leaving alternative care.[i] We focus on young adults' experiences of their transition from different forms of care to independent living in one industrial region of North-West Russia. Interviews were conducted with 22 young adults. We consider education as a factor structuring the individual life biography and thus as highly crucial for later life inclusion (Gilligan, Arnau-Sabates 2017). Therefore, understanding the choice of education and what factors affect this choice is important from the viewpoint of its impact on the later professional trajectory, and, thus, even income.

We explore the decision junctures in education by analysing how the studied young adults narrate their choice of education and future prospects. The central concept in our analysis is 'agency'. As Hitlin and Elder (2007:185) state, the 'sociological issue is not whether agency exists but the extent to which one exercises it and the circumstances that facilitate or hinder that exercise'. In our understanding, young adults who are about to leave care make a choice (of education) – i.e. exercise agency – and they do it within both enabling and constraining structures. Through our modification of Hitlin and Elder's conceptualisation of agency (2007) we ask: 1) What modes of agency do care leavers exercise in their choices of education and 2) What factors affect the modes? In order to fully answer the first question, special attention is paid to the temporal dimension of decision-making, professional identity and individual sense of agency, while the second question is structured by the analysis of the macro-, meso- and micro-level factors affecting agency. This allows us to understand how agency is formed at the level of individual life

histories. However, individual choices are made under certain structural conditions that determine opportunities and set limits.

The study of young care leavers' transition to adult life is not new to social research. However, our focus on agency makes it possible to take a fresh look at this transition, moving beyond the so-called problem-oriented frame which largely focuses on studying the problems this group of people face. It also helps us to focus on the active position of the individual who is able to make (rational) decisions and achieve short- and long-term goals instead of, for instance, the concept of adaptation. The latter rather involves a reactive strategy of an individual who is forced to adapt to a new situation and learn the new rules of social interaction, while agency focuses on strategic action and the ability of an individual to build their own life project. We focus on the studied care leavers' goals, expectations, feeling of control over one's life and (in)dependent ability to do things and make choices.

By focusing on agency, instead of hardships, we pay attention to their resources and resilience, which are also connected with the concept of subjective agency involving a) perceived capacities and b) perceived life chances or expectations of what life holds in store. Such self-efficacy and sense of agentic possibility has important life-course consequences. (Hitlin, Johnson, 2015.) Such feelings are themselves resources that can be utilised in the face of difficulties and contribute to mental and physical well-being (Andersson 2012). Thus, a person with strong conviction and the ability to control various aspects of their daily life, who believes that their efforts will pay off in the future, will have greater persistence and will more successfully cope with various challenges (Hitlin, Johnson 2015). In this chapter, we aim to understand the conditions, in particular the kind of support, that could facilitate the development of such subjective agency among these children in vulnerable life situations in the given Russian context.

We first discuss the federal social policy concerning this particular group of children with a focus on education. Next, we introduce our data and conceptual framework to build the scheme for our analysis of agency. After our empirical analysis of the modes of agency, we discuss the different-level factors that affect the modes.

Care Leavers, Education and State Support

As this volume discusses, Russian child welfare policy has undergone dramatic changes in the 2010s. The deinstitutionalisation reforms – with its emphasis on family(-style) care and community-based services – stem from the common understanding that residential care leads to weak social adaptation and social exclusion. In this regard, one of the priority areas of reform has been to develop after-care services for young people, aged 18-23, transitioning from care into their independent life, by providing them with many kinds of support during this transition, including counselling and help with paperwork for entering educational institutions. The family support centres (*tsentr sodeystviya semeynomu vospitaniyu)* are former children's homes now assigned with this new function, but as Kulmala et al. show in Chapter 4 and 6 of this volume, the input of NGOs is significant, with many kinds of supplementary and complementary support services for care leavers. For instance, the NGO-run (and often state-funded) programmes recruiting volunteers who act as an individual support person for a young person in alternative care (*nastavnik*) are currently widely spread throughout the country.

The transition to independent living is surrounded by many expectations of a certain kind of path, the deviations from which are usually seen as concerning (Furlong 2012). In Russia, the notion of individual well-being is viewed in the traditional sense as having education, paid work, residence, marriage and children (Glendinning et al. 2004). Such an understanding is clearly seen in the social policy tools designed for children deprived of parental care. Generally, the benefits that young people leaving care receive from the state include one-off and monthly payments, the right to get an apartment (of one's own property, which is quite unusual in the international terms), subsidies for housing and communal services and compensation for public transportation costs. In the sphere of education, care leavers have the right to free-of-charge vocational and compensated higher education.

The Russian primary school system consists of three levels: primary education (four years), basic general education (five years) and secondary education (two years). Primary and basic general education of nine grades is compulsory for everyone. Upon completion of a nine-year programme, the student has a choice of either completing the remaining two years at a normal school or of a transfer to a specialised professional training school. The first option is the so-called high-school

type optional upper secondary education (or complete secondary general school) with 11 years in total. Alternatively the student may enter vocational education institutions (professional secondary education), which have been traditionally divided into low-prestige ones (PTUs) and better-regarded technical schools (*technicumi)* and medical schools (with nurse level), for instance. If after having completed 11 years of general school the student takes the Unified State Exam (USE), this enables them to enrol at universities or any other higher educational institutions (tertiary education). One can continue to higher education without the USE with a vocational degree.

According to the OECD (2019), most adults in the Russian Federation attain at least upper secondary non-tertiary education: 47.7% complete secondary education with the full 11-year course, while 26.5% complete 9 years. The proportion of young adults (25 to 34-year-olds) who did not take an upper secondary degree is just 4%, much lower than the average across the OECD countries (15%). Post-secondary non-tertiary levels are very well established in Russia and provide opportunities to gain further vocational qualifications. Russia has the highest proportion of adults (25 to 64-year-olds) with a post-secondary non-tertiary qualification (20%) among the OECD countries. Most graduates have studied engineering, manufacturing and construction (58% compared to 19% on average across the OECD countries). Russia has one of the highest tertiary attainment rates across the OECD countries, at 63% of 25 to 34-year-olds compared with the OECD average of 44% (and the G20 average of 38%). Vocational and higher education is provided by state and non-state institutions. In all non-state educational institutions all students have to pay tuition fees, whereas approximately half of students in state educational institutions pay for their studies.

According to Russian law, children without parental care have the right to two secondary vocational degrees and to free training in the preparatory programmes of higher educational institutions, up to 23 years of age.[ii] The right to receive free-of-charge vocational education is accompanied by a full package of benefits and is thus obviously one of the important opportunities offered to children deprived of parental care. Young people transitioning from alternative care have the right to study full-time and free-of-charge twice at the vocational level of education. In addition, when studying in higher education – which one can enter either after having completed 11 grades of general school or a vocational degree – care leavers receive more

benefits than other students. The state support for (vocational) education is viewed by experts, including government officials, NGOs and social scientists, as an important element of a successful transition to adulthood and independent living (Abramov et al. 2016).

However, research has revealed many problems concerning the practical implementation of this right. As a rule, care leavers have a lower level of knowledge from elementary school in comparison to children brought up in their birth families. As a result, children deprived of parental care do not usually continue to upper secondary school (with eleven grades) and thus do not pass the Unified State Exam (USE), which is required for admission to higher education, which significantly complicates their access to higher education (Abramov et al. 2016); however, they can continue there without the USE after vocational education. The importance of education as a factor structuring the further life trajectory is recognised by NGOs, which might offer special tutoring programmes aimed at increasing the level of knowledge and training for the USE.

Studying is basically the only provided option. It is widespread among young people in alternative care to obtain nine grades and continue to vocational school. Even with this opportunity, strongly encouraged by the support system, young people encounter a number of restrictions that limit their options for choosing a profession that is interesting for them, as we show in this chapter. Against the background of often difficult life histories, it can be assumed that these young adults would need a more supported and individualised strategy in their transition to adulthood, including information and counselling to support their choices. Some research (Abramov et al. 2016; Chernova, Shpakovskaya 2019) has argued that increased benefits would contribute to the lack of motivation to consciously choose a future profession. It is more like the primary way to provide for themselves financially. It is also important to note that all the state benefits for education – as for the other benefits – are dependent on the status of having been in alternative care. Thus, even if much-needed, they can be seen as stigmatising to this particular group of young people.

Theoretical Framework: Agency within Limits

In our understanding, the educational choice of a young person is an individual action in a world of social structures. Educational choice is a critical juncture in the biography of any individual, having

a significant effect on their later life trajectories, as discussed above. As Hitlin and Elder (2007: 177) state, vulnerability obviously somewhat limits agency, but 'even those without power have the ability to make decisions though they face severe consequences for those choices'.

Therefore, what matters to us is to what extent the studied young adults exercise their agency when making their educational choices and what circumstances enable or restrict this practice. Even if the choice of education is an individual decision, it is structured by social and educational policies, social norms and values and individual preferences, which all contribute to a set of repertoires of possible choices. To analyse the various modes of agency, we use the conceptualisation by Hitlin and Elder (2007), modifying it in accordance with the objectives of our study. Hitlin and Elder distinguish four modes of agency: existential, pragmatic, identity and life-course agency. They put a particular emphasis on the temporal dimension – a long- or short-term orientation in action to understand an individual's ability to make independent and informed decisions combined with the planning horizon of certain actions. Existential agency is the fundamental premises for any ability to take independent action and take initiative and the ability to control one's behaviour. By pragmatic agency, the authors refer to individuals making choices in everyday life that are temporally proximate and do not involve planning, while life-course agency refers to the actions that aim at exerting influence on the formation of their life trajectory. The life-course mode contains two elements: situational agency with implementation of an action with long-term consequences, and a self-reflective belief in one's ability to achieve important life goals in the long run (self-efficacy). Thus, unlike pragmatic agency, this mode involves orientation to the future in accordance with certain expectations, aspirations and goals. As Hitlin and Johnson (2015) note, this is 'the power of looking ahead'. According to these authors, identity agency, in turn, interconnects with social norms that determine the behaviour of individuals as they intentionally seek to assimilate and comply with these norms recognised in a society as conventional patterns of behaviour. Individuals build their identities, and these identities determine subsequent behaviour.

By our modification of Hitlin and Elder's conceptualisation, we developed a conceptual scheme for our analytical purposes. This scheme is based on two criteria. One is the time horizon: either short-term planning in the case of the pragmatic mode of agency or long-term and strategic in life-course agency. Another criterion is our modification of identity agency, by which we refer to an

individual's ability to form a (positive) self-image in connection to their future professional life. Based on such an understanding, we included in our scheme a mode of identity agency with strong or weak identity construction in terms of sharing the value of education for further career plans. Weak identity is connected with a negative attitude towards education in general and the lack of a clear idea of the relationship between education and future career. With the strong mode, a young adult knows with whom and where they want to work in the future and the educational choice is a step in that direction – especially when combined with the life-course mode of agency. In the combination of the weak mode with the life-course type of planning, a person plans ahead, for instance, knowing that having vocational or higher education is crucial and is striving for that, yet without a concrete choice of profession. In the case of the strong identity mode and pragmatic agency, one might have a dream job but with no concrete efforts to strive in that direction, while in pragmatic agency with weak identity in terms of profession, a person – for one reason or another – is lost with their individual choices. In our analytical scheme we thus distinguish four types of agency with the above-explained dimensions (see also Figure 1):

- 1) pragmatic agency with weak identity construction in terms of future profession
- 2) life-course agency with weak identity construction in terms of future profession
- 3) pragmatic agency with strong identity construction in terms of future profession
- 4) life-course agency with strong identity construction in terms of future profession

The above-explained criteria were not chosen by chance. Considering the planning horizon and professional identity as accelerated and compressed (Stein 2006: 274), the transition of this particular group of young people is perhaps more linear than of their peers growing up in birth families. Despite the fact that the state provides these young care leavers with the opportunity to obtain two secondary vocational or one vocational and one higher education course for free, they have less opportunity to 'make a mistake' and 'try again' compared to their peers. Based on the fact that these young adults often lack the 'option to return' (Hiles et al. 2014: 1), we tend to think that they are in a position to 'choose right' in the first place when making a decision concerning their education and consequently their future profession.

In our analysis, we also pay special attention to care leavers' own perceptions of their agentic possibility, i.e. their own view of how much influence and control they have over their own future. Following Hitlin and Johnson (2015), we assume that belief in the ability to influence events in

one's life, as well as positive expectations from decisions made, are crucial for building a long-term life strategy. One of the practical goals of our work is to understand what types of support which are most significant and in demand by young people in the transition to adulthood will have a positive impact on the formation of their subjective well-being. Importantly, none of the modes represents the 'success' or 'failure' of a care leaver themselves, but the mode is structured with multiple external factors, as will be discussed in our analysis. As Hitlin and Johnson (2015, pp. 3-4) note, 'people differ in their individual abilities, as well as structurally determined advantages which provide them with more active options for action'.

In our analysis, we paid particular attention to interviewed care leavers' narrations of their educational choice(s), which we then categorised through the above-mentioned two dimensions of the ability for future planning and identity construction and their possible combinations. After having distributed all the interviews by their modes of agency, considered which factors influence the practised modes of agency. We identify several explanatory factors at three different levels of analysis: macro, meso and micro. The macro-level structural conditions include the system of social support. The mesoscale refers to the regional and local level infrastructures, including the specificities of labour markets and availability of different educational institutions as well as the presence of different forms of alternative care and availability support services. Micro-level factors are more related to an individual themselves and their close circles (birth and foster parents, staff of the residential institutions, school teachers, social workers and pedagogues, mentors, friends and peers). This level of analysis will allow us to study an individual's subjective value towards education, and make a subjective assessment of their available resources and their ability to use them.

Data and Analysis

The empirical materials of the study consist of 22 thematic interviews with young people aged 18 to 24 (20.5 years in average) living in one region located in the North-Western Federal District of the Russian Federation. Of these 22 adults, 14 are females and eight males. All the interviewed young adults had experience of living and being brought up in a form of alternative care (children's home, foster family, children's village or a combination of these). Thirteen grew up in a children's village, three in residential institutions and the other six had first been in residential institutions

and later re-placed in foster and guardian families. Some of the informants had also returned to the institution from family placement.

We partly implemented our research as co-research in the following manner. We first interviewed seven young adults, who were found and volunteered to participate in our research through our earlier contacts and collaboration with a local child welfare NGO.[iii] As a response to our request to find co-researchers, three of these young care leavers were recommended by the director of an NGO. We talked with them and they were willing to engage as co-researchers to peer-interview their fellows. The co-researchers conducted fifteen peer interviews with their peer care leavers whom they searched and contacted by themselves. Thus, the care leavers interviewed by the co-researchers remained anonymous to us, the adult researchers. All the interviews were recorded and transcribed.

Since the topic is very sensitive and the interviewees and interviewers involved have most likely experienced severe hardships in their lives, we considered it of the utmost importance that the young people – both interviewers and interviewees – had a local focal point that they trusted and with which we have a confidential relationship. In this region, our partner was a children's village, which explains the dominance of this form of alternative care in our study.[iv] The local coordinator, employed by the NGO, assisted the interviewers. Her contact information was delivered to each of the interviewed persons, indicating that informants can turn to her with any issues or feelings related to the interviews. For the sake of sensitivity, we do not name the studied Russian region here. Moreover, all the people and organisations referred to and cited in this chapter have been anonymised.

Any research with children or young adults involves ethical issues that need to be addressed, including concerns about possible exploitation, child protection, informed consent and gatekeeper issues (Törrönen et al. 2018). We have tried to be sensitive and reflective to any issues raised by the young adults involved in the process and spent time going through our research design and providing, alongside the needed research skills, training on numerous ethical issues, such as principles of confidentiality, anonymity and voluntary participation. These principles needed to be shared with everyone they interviewed and everyone's consent was recorded at the beginning of the interview. We have discussed – and will continue discussing – in more detail elsewhere why

we engaged in such a research design and introduced the different phases of our collaborative project (Kulmala, Fomina 2019).

As our research focused on young people's agency, we found it impossible to carry out the research without the involvement of young people in the research process. As usual for participatory research methods (e.g. Kilpatrick et al, 2007; Bradbury-Jones and Taylor, 2013), we wanted to involve young people as active agents in our knowledge production and hopefully thus support their sense of agency. Our purpose has been to highlight young people as experts in their own life and the alternative care system in question through their personal experience, while providing some tools that can be useful in their work and study life: we for instance trained them in qualitative interview and interaction skills and gave certificates for their participation (Kulmala, Fomina 2019). We wanted to give young people a voice in understanding the forms of support that have been useful to them during and when leaving alternative care. Ultimately, we hope our research will bring improvements to these forms of support, which is why we emphasise the importance of collaboration with practitioners. However, as admitted earlier (Kulmala, Fomina 2019), the processes within which knowledge is being constituted, starting from research interests to full research designs, have been adult-led, which obviously creates the potential to exploit young people for the adult researcher's ends (Kilpatrick 2007: 352). In our focus group discussion with the co-researchers afterwards, these young adults reported many kinds of benefits and learning processes they had gained during the process (Bradbury-Jones, Taylor 2013: 163-165; Kilpatrick et al. 2007: 367-368).

We have sought to overcome the asymmetric power relationships between the researchers and researched (Bradbury-Jones and Taylor 2013; Kilpatrick et al. 2007). Anyone can recognise multi-layered asymmetries in the situation where we, middle-class (and partly middle-aged) academically educated women interview 20-year-old young people who have experienced situations leading to alternative care replacements. Through peer-to-peer talk, we have hoped to also open new perspectives on the studied issues. For example, similar experiences bring to interviews mutual understanding and language that perhaps allow for better communication and a more accurate reflection of young people's own thinking in our research materials (Törrönen et al. 2018; Kulmala, Fomina 2019).

Both groups of interviewers used the same interview guide. The interview questions followed a sort of life-cyclic logic, including topics, such as birth family, placement in alternative, school and studies, working life, housing, leisure time, close relationships, satisfaction with one's life and future plans. At all stages of life, we have tried to understand the involvement of the young person in the decision-making over their life and the kinds of support they have received around this. Special attention was paid to possible preparatory programmes and support for transitioning to independent life. All interviews were conducted in December 2018 - May 2019.

Analysis of the interviews was conducted using thematic coding. Codes, combined into categories and thematic units of text, were arranged chronologically, in accordance with the interviewed young adults' life trajectories. Concerning the educational choice such as making decisions on education and interpretations of one's choices, we analysed and arranged the narrations of the young adults through paying attention to: 1) the school trajectory (starting from elementary school); 2) the desired level of education; 3) the decision to enter a specific educational institution for a particular speciality; 4) the attitude towards education in general and subjective assessment of their experience in school and vocational education; 5) the influence of the family and close circle regarding the adoption of a particular educational decision; 6) taking into account the regional profile of the educational space and the employment market. This made it possible to track, on the one hand, the influence of various factors on the formation of the agency of young people in different forms of alternative care, and on the other hand, their subjective perceptions of education and their own abilities and skills. After the thematic coding and biographical organisation of the interview data, each of us individually placed each of the young adults into one category of the above-presented four different modes of agency, created by us based on the theory, after which we compared and explained to each other our choices in terms of the categories. Both the coding and categorisation results were discussed several times by the authors, which helped to reduce the amount of influence of the subjective interpretation of one researcher on the data. Based on these conversations and our theory-driven analysis of the modes of agency, we resulted in agreeing upon the modes, as presented in Figure 1 (n indicating the number of young adults in each category). Each of the modes is next discussed in more detail in light of our empirical materials.

Figure 1. Agency, identity construction and time horizon

[add Figure 1 here – original in a separate file]

	Agency and time horizon	
	Pragmatic (temporally proximate)	**Life course** (long term)
Weak in terms of future profession	n10	n1
Strong in terms of future profession	n3	n6

Agency and identity construction

Studied Young Adults and Modes of Agency

As stated above, we consider education to be a structuring factor for further life trajectories. It is highly connected with the well-being of an individual and also an important element of their identity. Importantly, all 22 young care leavers from different forms of alternative care were studying or had studied at the time of the interviews: 16 people had received or were receiving secondary vocational education and 6 people were studying at universities. As a rule, the typical educational trajectory is to complete nine years at school and then to continue to vocational school; only one of the studied young adults chose to take eleven grades which allowed them to continue straight to university.

When we look at the educational choices of the studied care leavers, the pragmatic mode of agency with weak professional identity construction turned out to be dominant, appearing in 10 out of 22 care leavers. Pragmatic agency with strong professional identity construction was identified in three cases, while six showed life-course agencies with strong identity construction.

Life-course agency with weak construction of professional identity in turn appeared to be rare: we categorised only one young adult into this mode.[v] We now turn to a more detailed discussion of each of the combinations.

'Who knows how life will turn out?': Pragmatic Agency with Weak Professional Identity Construction

This mode of agency is characterised by the young person's short-term horizon for planning their education and life course more generally. For young adults who demonstrate such a pragmatic mode with weak identity construction, education is not related to acquiring skills that can be used in future work; instead, it is considered as an opportunity to make use of the available benefits for studying. They have no strong opinion on the field of study and often might change their speciality when obtaining the second vocational education they are entitled to, as seen in the following interview quote: 'Well, I want to study, because up to 23 you can do it for free and if there is such a chance, I do not want to miss it. Why would I later pay to do it if I can study for free?' (F_21_1). Almost as a rule, these young adults go for the so-called standard choice of sphere of vocational education: for instance, girls for beautician or confectionary jobs, and boys for car renovation. Usually young people who implement this mode tend to get two, often somewhat unrelated, degrees, the choice of which is often influenced by advice from someone in their close environment (social pedagogues or foster parents, for instance) or due to the ease and guaranteed admission because of quotas for including care leavers or knowing that there are easy exams, as one of the interviewed young adults explained her, rather haphazard, decision to study medicine:

> I went to study to be a nurse, I don't know, it somehow happened that my
> [foster] mother told me: '... you need to become a doctor, a doctor, it's very
> suitable for you, since you have such a petit shape and a white coat suits you...'.
> And you know, I stuffed it in my head after that, well, why not? (F_22_3)

Later, explaining the choice of her second profession, social work, she explained that the choice was partly made because of its connection with medicine, and also because there were easy entrance exams: 'And social work ... is still, you know, closely connected with medicine, with

communication with people, that is, something like that. […] Well, plus the entrance exams were easy [laughs]…' (F_22_3). Later, when thinking about future work, the respondent concluded that working in a sanatorium would be a good option.

The stability of the everyday life plays an important role in how young people choose educational institutions. Having friends and support networks (foster parents, social pedagogues, mentors) as well as housing in the area where they have lived become important criteria for choosing educational institutions in order to stay in the same place. In such case, the available educational infrastructure obviously influences the choices available. One young adult had a dream job in mind but such, quite rare, education was not available where she lives and she did not want to move:

> When we went to study, I generally wanted to become a car mechanic, … or an animal attendant. There was no animal attending here close to us anywhere. So decided to study to be a car mechanic. We only had this course in [city name]. When I went there, they told me, 'We don't take girls'. This was, damn it, it was just such a disappointment. As a result, in short, the only profession left available was cook-confectioner. (F_24_4)

As seen in the quotation, her choice was not only restricted by the unavailability of a certain school in her place of residence but also by a highly stereotypical understanding of the gendered division of labour, which is to be considered as a structural constraint.

The weak discursive construction of professional identity is often also characterised by a negative attitude towards education in general. These young adults often also lacked any concrete plans to work in the acquired profession, but they were more concerned about finding some job with a stable income. One of the young adults described her choice of working in the public sector as a social worker: 'that is, I can work everywhere – [social workers are needed] in the police, and they're in kindergartens, schools, everywhere'.(F_21_1) Weak identity construction in terms of future career is also expressed in the rejection of strategic planning of their life project/strategy since not much has an effect on it. Such a not-planning strategy is sometimes seen in a somewhat more optimistic light: 'Everything will be fine' (M_21_8), as one young adult saw his future life. However, more typically it was expressed through lack of trust in one's own ability to make change because everything can just change, as seen in the following quote from a young adult who did

not believe that there is need to make plans for the future: *'who knows how life will turn out?'* (F_22_3).

'I was attracted to car repair ever since childhood': Pragmatic agency with Strong Professional Identity Construction

Unlike the previous mode, pragmatic agency with strong identity construction in terms of future profession is characterised to a certain extent by the young adult's own desires of future profession, yet they lack the strategic planning for how to get there, as one young care leaver addressed his long-time wish to work with cars: *'For me, as if from childhood, I was drawn to car repair, and the like. Well, yes, I wanted to learn to drive too.'* (M_20_2). However, these young people did not typically describe concrete efforts and educational plans to achieve the job in question. Young people who demonstrate this mode of agency often receive a second vocational education in a related field. The influence of the surrounding community on the choice of educational institution and occupation of research participants does not always occur directly, but indirectly. A young adult, having chosen for himself to study carpentry and glass work, says that he decided to follow in his father's footsteps:

> I: And why did you decide to go to the school you are currently attending?
> R: Well, I decided to follow in my father's footsteps. He is a carpenter.
> I: Well, did you want it yourself, or did your dad advise you?
> R: No, no, I wanted to, I had a lot of options where I could go. In principle, my entry grades allowed me to enrol in all the colleges. But I decided to go to this college. (M_20_21).

However, in the end, he did not end up with any direct educational path. Even despite the fact that often these paths of this type are not linear, but intermittent, young people might face difficulties with their studies, they might even quit but then anyhow return to the initially selected programme or similar/related fields. Education is anyhow seen an integral, obligatory part of their life, the experience that structures their further biography, as one put it: *'because if there is no education, but education is needed'* (M_20_2).

Young male research participants often had experience in military service between receiving two degrees. This experience is usually seen as beneficial, on the one hand as a resource that temporarily provides an opportunity to think about life trajectories but on the other hand because it can also be converted into education and a future profession: 'In fact, with the service in the army – you served, came back – you have more opportunities, in the end, with getting a job too, there is something else' (M_20_2). Strong identity construction in terms of future profession combined with pragmatic agency was usually seen in the situations when the educational choice was one's own, yet this decision was taken within a short-term horizon, if any. In these situations, the choice of professional field was usually narrated through the positive perception of education generally. The supportive attitude of the close environment of a care leaver plays an important role for young people to learn about available educational institutions and gain support for their own desires and ability to act. Combining the pragmatic mode of agency with a strong construct of professional identity is quite rare. Most often strong professional identity is connected with another mode, namely life-course agency.

'At My Home, There Lies a Branching Plan – the Development of My Life': Life-course Agency with Strong Professional Identity Construction

Life-course agency can be characterised by the general orientation of graduates to design a life path in which education is a highly significant part of life. This mode connects the choice of an education with long-term planning in regards to future work, other personal life and place of residence. Young people engaging with this mode often go for higher education believing that through it they will be able to build a good professional trajectory. Life-course agency with strong construct of professional identity implies that young adults have a clear life plan and a long planning horizon with a particular speciality in their mind combined with a desire to work in the chosen sphere. When choosing educational institutions, these young adults know well what they want and what is needed to acquire the related goals, as one pointed out:

> Well, only because we have the technologist profession, here, though, when I
> was admitted, someone told me why would you go to a university when there is
> a college [where I live] for technologists? I said, 'Hey people, you do not

understand that there are higher education and vocational education'. That's it. And I didn't like the other specialities. (F_22_22)

For young people engaged with this mode, higher education is a logical and natural continuation of the vocational level of education and immersion in the chosen profession:

> And so I chose the job of a technologist because it's interesting: I'll study the other side of cooking, that is, I studied to be a cook for three years, that is, this is one step, the inside, this is the kitchen, there, the workshop, that's it, the technologist he looks at it all from above and controls it all. This is also interesting, because I have this commanding tone in me, so to speak. It is necessary to control someone, to direct someone somewhere, to move. (F_22_22)

Some of the young adults wanted to make it explicit that it is their own achievement to be proud of being admitted to higher education universities, instead of any quota or other benefits, which are often considered as somewhat stigmatising:

> But I was admitted because of my knowledge, not just because of privileges, and that is also pleasing. So, to speak, a reason for pride, because many acquaintances asked 'did you get in because of your privileges?' I say, 'No, not because of it'. They were so surprise. (F_22_22)

Long-term life-path planning is the hallmark of life-course mode agency with strong professional identity. People make plans to achieve their educational and other specific goals, as well-illustrated in the following quote from an interview with a young adult who had carefully thought through her options – even drawing a chart with those different options:

> I drew a chart with different options of the course of my life. That's it. To finalise my studies now study, then go on to a Master's programme. Then stay at home [with kids] if my husband's salary allows. If not, then I'll go on maternity leave and then come back to work. I will try to find job with as good salary as possible because having family and children requires money. So, if I'm not able to work at all, then I'm going to become a home baker, making cakes by order. That's what I like and doesn't distract me too much from the child. If I don't have a family

then I'll work hard. Exactly. I will work in a company or at home, as a self-employed pâtissier. I would probably like to finish my studies, stay home and then open my own pastry shop for a while. (F_22_22)

Life-course agency with strong professional identity construction was also sometimes expressed through refusal of the standard trajectory of certain professions that care leavers might typically (be advised to) choose, as one young adult reflected on her choice

> In general, I didn't want to go into nursing, I didn't want to be a chef, any of those professions... which I had to choose from. I didn't want to continue at school either. I wanted to go to a pedagogical college where all the best would go. It's a demanding sphere. I got in easily. And I long ago promised to myself that I will finish university. (F_21_6)

As illustrated also in the quotation above, life-course agency with strong identity construction in terms of future profession was usually connected with a developed understanding of the utility of their efforts. They showed pretty strong self-belief to achieve the set goals and importantly concerning personal control, mastery over one's life course.

'The most important thing is that I graduate': Life-course Agency with Weak Professional Identity Construction

Life-course agency with weak identity construction in terms of profession of identity by profession was a rare case. This mode was characterised by the notion of the importance of having education along with showing efforts to achieve and finalise it, unlike the earlier described pragmatic modes. Studying and consequently having the degree constitutes the value itself, while the sphere and future professions did not seem to matter that much, as illustrated by the following quote: 'I graduated successfully. Then things went well – I met a young man. That's it, I got married, now I'm working. Thanks to my studies, everything also went well, everything is fine with me'. (F_21_9)

All in all, education is an important structural factor in the entire biography of young adults leaving different forms of alternative care. As our empirical analysis shows, two opposite modes of agency turned out to be dominant: pragmatic agency with weak professional identity construction and

life-course agency with strong professional identity construction. In order to understand and explain the factors that influence the modes and their combinations, we must discuss certain explanatory factors.

Why Certain Modes of Agency?

As stated above, we understand that the educational choice of care leavers is an individual action in a world of social structures which either facilitate or hinder the exercise of agency. In the context of Russia, the state stimulates education, the choice of which still requires a personal decision, which again can be affected by many factors ranging from macro-level policies to micro-level personality traits. As people vary in terms of their individual capacities and their structural advantages that allow for more agentic options (Hitlin, Johnson, 2015), in this section, we aim to understand the factors at the macro-, meso- and micro-levels that either enable or constrain the individual choice of the studied care leavers.

Macro-level Explanations

It is important to emphasise that all of the young adults who participated in our research (had) studied at the moment of the interviews. Thus, we can conclude that most Russian care leavers use the opportunity provided by the state and choose to study, which is not something that is obvious in international comparisons (Gilligan, Arnau-Sabatés 2017). Furthermore, several of the studied young adults, again quite atypically in the wider comparison, have continued to university. Thus, state policy is obviously an enabling macro-level structural factor. Studying also allows some more time before the 'full transition' to independent living, since many colleges and universities provide living in dormitories and support services from the social pedagogues of those educational institutions. Obviously one crucial factor is that completion of a degree as such opens up new opportunities in the labour market that one would not have without any education; in other words, education serves as a major institutional pillar of social inclusion.

However, the choice of education is socially channelled. In the Russian context, the state heavily directs care leavers to receive vocational education, since many privileges and benefits are targeted at care leavers having formal student status at such educational institutions. In sum, the

care leavers receive financial support until the age of 23 if they enrol in vocational educational institutions. Leaving school after nine grades, young people can have the full package of state support for two degrees of secondary vocational or one secondary vocational and one higher vocational education programme up to 23 years of age.

According to our study, children without parental care, as a rule, finish nine grades (instead of the possible eleven grades), after which they receive one or two degrees of vocational education, while eleven grades would open up the possibility of higher education (although only once). According to our interviews, most young adults had not even considered – let alone been encouraged by the official support system – to take the full eleven grades; moreover, not all were even fully aware of this option. We consider the widely spread stereotypical picture of children deprived of parental care as 'bad students' (Chernova, Shpakovskaya in this volume) as a structural-level restricting factor. Furthermore, it seems that young adults leaving care are limited to the 'standard choice' – the choice of 'traditional' professions such as nursing, hairdressing, cooking, car mechanics, etc., the choices of which also follow very gendered patterns.

On the other hand, though, this system of two supported degrees (in different spheres if desired) provides some flexibility to re-think that this group of young people might not have because of the lack of a place to return to. If choosing for themselves the educational trajectory of eleven grades and admission straight into higher education, these young people deprive themselves of the 'right to make mistakes' and the opportunity to make other choices.

Meso-level Explanations

The studied young people's dominant engagement with pragmatic agency with weak identity construction in terms of future profession is influenced by the regional labour market and local educational infrastructure, which we define as meso-level**.** As shown, at this level, the lack of or presence of an educational facility strongly influences the choice of these young people, who often have few options to move to study further away, which is also dependent on the state policy on the provision of housing. The regional specificities of available industries and thus the labour

market obviously affects which educational institutions are available and, consequently, also the standard professions that might be more easily accessible to this group of young people. Thus, the accessible and standard choices vary from region to region.

In our understanding, the meso level also includes the availability and use of different forms of alternative care. It became obvious that young adults who live in residential institutions are less informed about their options, as one peer-interviewer reflected to us in a focus group discussion: 'In one interview, I realised what some people lack – not necessarily monetary support but a person who would tell them what can be done without money. […] We [from a children's village] know our rights better, we know what we can or cannot do.' (P1, focus group discussion)

In the residential institutions, care leavers are more often advised to choose certain educational institutions as the standard professions, as one explained: 'I was told that it was possible to go to a college … At that moment, they were youth workers in [place]. They came, told me that I could go to [town] to study, that they would help me with this choice of a profession and arrange everything.' (M_21_8)

In NGO-supported facilities there seem to be more seminars and training dedicated to the choice of education and profession. This is in line what Kulmala et al. show in chapter 6 of this volume: despite the new formal requirement of the family support centres to provide after-care services for young people leaving care, these centres often fail or fulfil this obligation to a minimum. This being the case, the existence of an active NGO community in the region in question and the availability of its work for particular care leavers seems to be a significant enabling factor. According to our research, it clearly seems that it is the NGO-run children's villages or certain other projects targeted at care leavers which do better in this sphere by putting emphasis on individual support, counselling and encouragement – which brings us to the importance of the micro-level factors.

Micro-level Explanations

The micro level is connected with young adults themselves, their family and their close environment. At this level, the support of significant adults – be they foster parents, social workers or volunteer support persons – crucially affects the attitude to education in general as well as the choices of the educational trajectories of a young adult. As one young adult, with strong life-course agency combined with strong professional identity, said:

> First, my mother's support, because my [foster] mother always helped with my studies, and I finished my studies well enough. That is, if I had finished my studies poorly, I would not be able to go on to study as I wished, that is pedagogical college. I was able to enrol, the competition that year was huge, even among those who have benefits. I could do it. And also, the university – if I didn't have that knowledge throughout school and college, I would not have been able to enrol most likely ... My mom helped us a lot with our studies; that is, she followed what we did, so we were good students. And they were able to go to further colleges, and, here, for everyone who lived in our family, all graduated from college for sure. (F_21_6)

Or, vice versa, it can lead to the formation of pragmatic mode with weak identity construction in terms of future work, as seen in the following quote: 'My guardians (*opekuny*) here ... did not inform me. They just suggested to me that it is better to do such a speciality.' (M_21_17)

It does not have to be a family member; the important point is that a young person trusts someone to discuss their future plans (Pinkerton, Rooney 2014). This person should guarantee that the young person in question has all the necessary information to make a decision concerning their education. This requires knowing the young person well enough and carefully listening to their needs and wishes and a realistic (not underestimating!) understanding of their capabilities. Importantly, it requires efforts to strengthen the perceptions of the possibility of agency. It is a question of the self-efficacy of a young person, about a sense of control over their own life to believe that they have the ability to make decisions and that those decisions can have an effect over their future. Developing such a mastery is a resource in its own right, since a person with strong control believes that their efforts will pay off in the future and will tend to persevere in the face of hardship (Hitlin, Johnson 2015). Our analysis shows that residential care in state

institutions is less likely to provide such a positive outcome which would positively contribute to the self-efficacy and resilience of these young adults.

Conclusions: Not-to-plan vs. Mastery over one's Life

As shown, two modes of agency were dominant: on the one hand, pragmatic agency with weak construction of professional identity, often combined with the so-called not-to-plan strategy; on the other hand, life-course agency with strong professional identity construction, often combined with strong self-efficacy, i.e. a sense of control over one's life through own choices and decisions. Both modes result from the combination of factors at all three levels. Even if the macro-level structures are in principle enabling, without strong individual support and planning at the micro-level, the majority of the studied care leavers fail to build their desired life course at once. However, this cannot be considered as a 'success' or 'failure' of the young adult themselves, as there are external factors that affect the modes.

Obviously individual life trajectories and experiences also contribute to the overall picture of planning. Among the care leavers practising pragmatic modes of agency (with weak or strong professional identity) we saw quite a few cases of 'not-planning' (Appleton 2019: 10-11) intertwined with a sense that planning would be worth it. These young adults could not believe that their plans could come true. Instead, their understanding was that planning does not matter because life goes as it goes. In fact, based on the severe hardships that these young people have experienced in their lives, such a perception can be considered as a consistent, logical continuum of 'ending up doing what (s)he has most reason to do' (Appleton 2019: 7; Morton 2011: 577). The life experience of young people leaving care is nothing like stable; perhaps only inconsistency is the stable thing. Life has most likely brought up endless occasions that the person has not planned or even wanted to happen. In such a context, it is of the utmost importance that these young people have a trusted person to plan together with (consider the concept of 'shared agency' (Bratman 2013 cited in Appleton 2019: 5-6).

However, we would argue that is it is not only a question of care leavers but partly also a generational issue. The research on the Y and Z generations to which these young care leavers belong show more widely a more fragmented process of transition to adulthood (Biggart, Walther

2006) and that the conventional markers of adulthood are not necessarily the same any more as they were for the older generations (Radaev 2018). As Radaev (2018) argues, millennials seem to appreciate formal education to a lesser extent and are less oriented towards choosing their profession and workplace for 'forever'. Instead, this generation can be characterised as being in a constant search for work and to develop themselves. This approach includes rejecting routine work that would guarantee a stable income and ensure a mundane life. Thus, in addition to the 'not-planning' strategy clearly connected to the personal, sometimes hard, life experience that clearly would not promote trust in the future, these young adults are also representatives of a certain generation which more widely refuses to make long-term plans. However, in comparison to their peers who live in their birth families, the transition to adulthood of this particular group of young adults is sped up and they are forced to make early decisions that have crucial consequences for their later life trajectories (Hitlin, Johnson 2016), often without the necessary support. Often this happens with no option to return (Stein, 2006). Unlike their peers, who might have better chances to return to their birth parents in the case of a 'wrong decision', these young adults are in a weaker position in terms of the above-described self-search.

However, we did also identify careful planning through the several cases of life-course agency with strong identity construction in terms of future profession. Here we can confirm that there are truly enabling structures at the macro (and meso) levels, but they are not enough as such; it still requires a great positive influence of external factors at the micro level such as the presence of an encouraging foster parent, an accompanying teacher and strong connections (see above-mentioned shared agency; Gilligan, Arnau-Sabatés 2017). Usually this mode was combined with strong self-efficacy, a strong sense of control over one's life and the ability to see the causal influence of one's own decisions and choices. Providing support and care that promote the development of such agency is highly important since, as research shows (Andersson 2012), strong feelings of control accumulate in many spheres of life and thus contribute to overall well-being. But it seems that this is something one can achieve only through highly individualised care, which still appears to be an underdeveloped approach in Russian official after-care services. However, as in many other fields, here Russian NGOs are the forerunners in developing new practices and approaches (Kulmala et al. forthcoming).

All in all, our investigation of care leavers' agency with a temporal dimension clearly helps us to see the intertwined nature of individual agency, circumstance (local cultures) and social structure and how they come together to impact on vulnerability, social divisions and inequalities (Pinkerton, Rooney 2014). Despite significant measures of state social support in the field of education, young care leavers remain in a vulnerable situation in contemporary Russian society. One can also see a certain discrepancy between the formal rules and the practice of realising the right to education. Moreover, their public image as a marginalised and stigmatised group limits their opportunities at the practical level and must affect their subjective perception of their own educational opportunities and more widely of their mastery over their own life (Hitlin, Johnson 2015). The studied young adults indeed talked quite a lot about stigmatisation and discrimination related to their status, starting from the first grades and consequently affecting later educational strategies at the level of school education associated with their social status. Targeted support for this specific group might also end up being stigmatising. In our conversations with our co-researchers, it became clear that the provided support is needed and appreciated, even if there is some ambiguity in this regard. During our excursion to learn about youth services in neighbouring Finland, these young adults started to think about the possible benefits of the One-Stop Guidance Centres operating on the principle of anonymity and available to all youths (Määttä 2017). However, the Russian system can be considered generous in terms of material support (owned housing, free education), although it often fails to provide much-needed individual (emotional) support to young adults considering their available options.

References

In this volume:

Chapter 7: Chernova and Shpakovskaya

Chapter 4: Kulmala et al.

Abramov, R.N., Antonova, K.A., Il'in, A.V., Grach, E.A., Lyubarskiy, G.Y. and Chernova, Z.V. 2016. *Trayektorii sotsial'noy i professional'noy adaptatsii vypusknikov detskikh domov v Rossii (obzor issledovatel'skogo otcheta)* [Trajectories of social adaptation of care leavers of children's homes in Russia (review of the research report)]. Moskva: SB Grupp.

An, S., Kulmala, M. 2020. [in print] Global deinstitutionalisation policy in post-Soviet space: A comparison of child-welfare reforms in Russia and Kazakhstan, *Global Social Policy*.

Andersson, M.A. 2012. Identity Crises in Love and at Work: Dispositional Optimism as a Durable Personal Resource, *Social Psychology Quarterly*, 75(4): 290–309.

Appleton, P. 2019. Anchors for Deliberation and Shared Deliberation: Understanding Planning in Young Adults Transitioning from Out-of-home Care, *Qualitative Social Work*, https://doi.org/10.1177/1473325019869810

Arnau-Sabatés, L. Gilligan, R. 2015. What Helps Young Care Leavers to Enter the World of Work? Possible Lessons Learned from an Exploratory Study in Ireland and Catalonia, *Children and Youth Services Review*, 53: 185–191.

Biggart, A., Walther, A. 2006. Coping with Yo-yo-Transitions: Young Adults Struggle for Support, between Family and State in Comparative Perspective, In: E. Ruspini, C. Leccardi (eds) *A New Youth? Young People, Generations and Family Life*, New York: Routledge: 41–62.

Bradbury-Jones, C., Taylor, J. 2015. Engaging with Children as Co-researchers: Challenges, Counter Challenges and Solutions, *International Journal of Social Research Methodology,* 18(3): 161–173.

Bratman, M.E. 2013. *Shared Agency: A Planning Theory of Acting Together*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Chernova, Z., Shpakovskaya, L. 2019. *Traektorii uspehsnogo perehoda k vzrosloi zhizni vypusknikov detskikh domov: resursy i bari'ery rezil'entnosti* [Care leavers' trajectories of transition to adult life: resources and barriers of resilience*].* Unpublished research report by the Charity Foundation Afirmetika Dobra. St. Petersburg: Afirmetika Dobra.

Furlong, A. 2012. *Youth Studies: An Introduction*. London and New York: Routledge.

Gilligan, R., Arnau-Sabatés, L. 2017. The Role of Carers in Supporting the Progress of Care Leavers in the World of Work, *Child & Family Social Work*, 22(2): 792–800.

Glendinning, A., Pak, O. Popkov, I.V. 2004. Youth, Community Life and Well-being in Rural Areas of Siberia, *Sibirica*, 4(1): 31–48.

Hiles, D., Moss, D., Thorne, L., Wright, J., Dallos, R. 2014. 'So what am I?'—Multiple Perspectives on Young People's Experience of Leaving Care, *Children and Youth Services Review*, 41: 1–15.

Hitlin, S., Elder Jr., G.H. 2007, Time, Self, and the Curiously Abstract Concept of Agency, *Sociological Theory*, 25(2): 170–191.

Hitlin, S, Kirkpatrick Johnson, M. 2015. Reconceptualizing Agency within the Life Course: The Power of Looking Ahead, *American Journal of Sociology*, 120(5): 1429–1472.

Ilyin, V.I. 2015. *Professiya kak individualnaya zhiznennaya koleya: kontseptualizatsiya kategorii* [Profession as an individual life track: Conceptualisation of categories], *Zhurnal issledovanij socialnoj politiki* [Journal of social policy studies], 13(2): 515-528.

Kilpatrick, R., McCartan, C., McAlister, S., McKeown, P. 2007. 'If I am Brutally Honest Research has Never Appealed to Me ...': The Problems and Successes of a Peer Research Project', *Educational Action Research*, 15, p351–369.

Kulmala, M. and Fomina, A. 2019. *Luoteisvenäläiset nuoret kanssa- ja vertaistutkijoina* [North-western Russian young people as co- and peer-Researchers]', *Idäntutkimus* [The Finnish Review of East European Studies], 4: 96-102.

Määttä, M. (ed.) 2017. *Uutta auringon alla? Ohjaamot 2014-2017.* [New under the sun? One-stop guidance centres 2014-2017.] Jyväskylä: Kohtaamo-hanke (ESR), Keski-Suomen ELY-keskus.

Morton, J.M. 2011. Toward an Ecological Theory of the Norms of Practical Deliberation, *European Journal of Philosophy*, 19(4): 561-584.

OECD 2019. *Education at a Glance 2019: Russian Federation*. [Online]. Available at: https://www.oecd.org/education/education-at-a-glance/EAG2019_CN_RUS.pdf (Accessed 17/12/2019)

Pinkerton, J., Rooney, C. 2014. Care Leavers' Experiences of Transition and Turning Points: Findings from a Biographical Narrative Study, *Social Work & Society*, 12(1): 1-12.

Radaev, V.V. 2018. Millennials Compared to Previous Generations: An Empirical Analysis, *Sociological Studies*, 3(3): 15–33.

Stein, M. 2006. Young People Aging out of Care: The Poverty of Theory, *Children and Youth Services Review*, 28(4): 422–434.

Törrönen, M., Munn-Giddings, C., Gavriel, C., O'Brien, N., Byrne, P. 2018. Reciprocal Emotional Relationships: Experiences of Stability of Young Adults Leaving Care, *Publications of the Faculty of Social Sciences* 75. Helsinki: University of Helsinki.

Walker, C. 2012. Class, Gender and Subjective Well-being in Russia's New Labour Market: Experiences of Young People in Ul'ianovsk and St Petersburg, *Zhurnal Issledovanii Sotsialnoi Politiki* [The Journal of Social Policy Studies], 10(4): 521.