Dealing with the Past in the Transition from Care. A post-structural analysis of young people`s accounts.

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©**Elisabeth Fransson**[1]**, Associate Professor, Telemark University College, Norway & Jan Storø, Associate Professor, Faculty of Social Sciences, Oslo University College, Norway**

Telemark University College, p.b 203, N – 3901, Porsgrunn, Norway.

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- **Transition from care**

- **Leaving care**

- **Young people**

- **Self work**

- **Residential child welfare institutions**

- **Post-structural analysis**

- **Qualitative**

- **Michel Foucault**

Abstract

Young people experiencing the transition from care often are weighed down by their past, both through their early experiences, but also by the way their past is made relevant in encounters with others. The aim of this article is two-fold. Firstly, to present a critical discursive analysis of young people's accounts of themselves in the transition from care. Secondly, to shed light on three different ways of making the

[1] Corresponding author. Tel. **+4735026200**
e-mail addresses. elisabeth.fransson@hit.no (E. Fransson), jan.storo@sam.hio.no (J. Storø)

transition from care; transition through a break with the past after moving out, transition through continuing change and transition as a way of dealing with the risk of further problems in their lives. The study is qualitative and includes 27 young women and men recruited from three child welfare institutions in the Oslo region of Norway. A multi-method approach including interviews, observations and documents has been used. The analytical framework is inspired by poststructuralist theory[2].

1 Introduction

1.1 Implicit assumptions in research about transition from care

A key question in research about transition from care has been what happens to young people when they leave foster homes and child welfare institutions. The answers given in international research indicate that things often do not turn out as well for those who have been in care as for other young people. Statistically young people who have been under care have poorer health than other young people; they fall more frequently out of the labour market and also tend to transmit problems to their own children (Stein and Munro 2008, Clausen and Kristofersen 2008, Killèn 2007, Bakketeig and Backe-Hansen 2008). An implicit assumption in this research is that young people who have been in care seem to be weighed down by their past. This article builds on research aimed at finding out *how* young people related to their past after they had left care. Drawing on a post-structural perspective, various stories about transition from care emerged. By focusing on how both constructions of self and past are done within Norwegian society today – especially in relation to certain values such as the biological link between parents and children, the article aims to provide knowledge about how young persons deal with their problematic pasts in making the transition from care.

1.2 A post structural perspective of past

A central focus within a post-structural perspective is to give attention to language, to how we speak, to how self is constucted through the language and to give attention to issues that for some reason are silent or silenced. In this article we understand the concept of *problematic past* as such an issue. In line with- post structuralist thinking, the past cannot be understood in an essentialist sense as something that has happened and that acts on the self in predetermined directions. Instead

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[2] The article is based on Elisabeth Franssons doctoral thesis in sociology at University of Oslo: *Fransson (2009)*.

past can be understood as constructed in time and space. Following the French philosopher Michel Foucault (1926-1984) the term discourse draws attention to what can be said at any moment, by whom and in which way (Foucault 1980, 1999). Foucault reminds us that it is not possible to think and act outside language. Drawing on Foucault a difficult past is therefore not an objective fact but a phenomenon constructed in a certain society, influenced by specific therapeutic ideas that gives the past specific meanings. The discourse concept gives analytical attention to how the past is given meaning in the culture, and in this case, in the accounts made by young persons about their transition from care. The term discourse is in other words used as an analytical tool for highlighting how the past is understood in the way young people talk about self in transition from care.

A post-structuralist perspective does not ignore the sense of a difficult childhood or the sense of how child welfare works. But used as an analythical tool it draws the attention towards central understandings and practises in child welfare institutions. Instead of focusing what went wrong in the past, the concept of discourse gives analytical attention to how the past is constituted and given meaning in the institutions and in meetings with significant others when young people move out of child welfare institutions (Fransson 2011). The concept of self work, connects to Foucault`s understanding of the subject as formed by both power technologies that others perform on individuals as well as self technologies they perform on themselves (Foucault 1980, Foucault 1988, Villadsen 2007).

The concept *self work*, as used here, is connected to the later works of Foucault. In the third volume of his The History of Sexuality entitled "The Care of the Self" (2002) Foucault shows how the self through history has been constituted. In antiquity the relation to self was intensified, and self care was central. To work with one's self was connected both to ethics and freedom. It was seen both as a right and as a demand. Self work demanded both an attitude and a set of actions where body care, health regimes,, physical training and a restrained satisfaction was central (Foucault 2002:59). This self-orientation changed over time from *a care for oneself,* to becoming *a comprehensive self-cultivation* in late-antiquity and *later the urge to find oneself.* Using the intersection between creating oneself and the more creative forces inherent in Foucault`s self work concept as a point of departure, this article examines different forms of self work found in the accounts made by young persons about leaving care. These accounts, initially gathered in the course of doctoral research (Fransson 2009), have been analyzed in a frame not unlike the perspective presented by Parton and O´Byrne (2000:174) who write, "what is important is not just what language *means* but what language *does* - what it enables human beings to imagine and to do, both to themselves and to

others". Before presenting these findings, it is necessary to describe the child welfare context in which these accounts are situated.

1.3 The Norwegian context

Norway is a country of nearly 5 million people. The society is strongly influenced by egalitarian values (Heidar 2000), and the Norwegian welfare system is built on a model where the state assumes primary responsibility for the welfare of its citizens. In Esping-Andersen's (1990) welfare system models, Norway is a social-democratic welfare regime where child welfare work is regulated by The Child Welfare Act of 1992 (Storø 2008b). This set of laws state that services may be given to young people between 18 and 23 in order to support them in the transition to independence. The state has no distinct duty to do so, but the decision should be made "in the best interest of the child".[3] In 2009 the legislation was changed so that child welfare services are now required by law to provide a written statement if they refuse to offer after-care services to a young person. Also the law states that a young person can file a complaint on this and other decisions made by child welfare services.

In Norway, 10 860 young people received after-care services in the period 1990 – 2005 (Kristofersen 2009). Of these, 53 % were males, 47 % were females and for a majority of these young people (55%) these services lasted less than one year. Financial support following care was the single most used measure while support for independent housing, education and work as well as prolongation of foster care after the age of 18 also increased markedly in this period. Child welfare services offer a wide range of possible services to care leavers. In addition to those mentioned above, care leavers can have access to a support person (Storø 2008b). Research evidence has shown that after-care services have had a positive impact on care leavers during this period (Clausen and Kristofersen 2008). In the years following World War II, various forms of aftercare services have been emphasized during different periods by the state (Storø 2009).

2 Methods

2.1 Research design and participants

The study is based on a qualitative design. This choice is theoretically based and connected to an interest in what often are the obvious and taken for granted facets of social life. It is not the methods themselves, but rather how the questions are asked, the way data are collected, processed and

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[3] Child Welfare Act 1992, 17. July, no. 100

analysed, making this study a qualitative one. The qualitative methods employed here have been adapted to fit their purpose (Widerberg 2001). In this respect, the analytical focus has been one of gaining access to different stories by care leavers. Therefore a variety of methodical approaches were used including individual interviews and gender-divided focus-group interviews, observations and studying documents such as program descriptions and one diary. In addition, conversations were held with child welfare workers responsible for the transition. The interview data consist of 17 interviews and 3 focus-group interviews with altogether 11 young people. Participant observational data was also collected from an after care group of 5 care leavers. The study included 27 young people aged from 18 to 27 (16 women and 11 men). All had shared the experience of having been taken into care as children or adolescents. All had lived for some time in child welfare institutions and some also had earlier lived in foster homes. At the time of the study, all had moved into independent living situations. All of the youths are Norwegian citizens though some with foreign-born parents had lived in Norway since they were children.

In keeping with the research design and the analytic strategy, it was important to focus on young men and women with certain common experiences. Additionally it was important to search for differences as well as similarities in their stories. The staffs of three different child welfare institutions in the Oslo region of Norway where the youths once had lived provided help in recruiting the 27 informants for the project.

2.2 Data collection

The informants were invited to choose the sites for the interviews. Most chose institutions where they once had lived while others wanted the interviews to take place in their homes, and a few chose to be interviewed in cafes. The interviews were arranged as conversations, and were meant to encourage the youths to freely choose topics. A key aim of the interview was to provide opportunities for each youth to tell how he/she understood himself/herself. The main research strategy in these encounters was to listen, but also to ask and challenge (Søndergaard and Staunes 2005). Empirical hard data such as exact dates were not sought. The overriding goal for the interviews with these young persons was to listen to their stories, how they told them, and how they interpreted them. By using this approach it became possible to collect many ambiguous stories. Observations made of the leaving care group provided an additional perspective supplementing the interviews. There the data were not limited to what these young people said to the researcher individually. Instead, this context provided ways of making the way they spoke to each other visible. These conversations provided a wealth of evidence about the endeavours by these young persons to present themselves as "ordinary young people".

The gender-divided focus groups were organised to go further into topics raised in the individual interviews. These included: being a mother at a young age experiences of leaving care, talking to each other about drug abuse after the transition and how they dealt with the past. The decision to set up gender divided group was taken to prevent one reality sphere from dominating the other, and to create a gendered room without discussing gender directly.

The individual interviews, text analyses and observations in the group of care-leavers were done by Elisabeth Fransson, who then did the focus group interviews in collaboration with Jan Storø.

2.3 Data analysis

The data analysis is to be understood as thematic. This implies that it is not person-oriented in which the individual biography is in the center. Instead the focus is on how experiences are articulated (Thaagard 2002). The thematic analysis was developed around concepts of discourse and self work inspired by Foucault. The key analytical question addressed centered upon the discourses these young people used in speaking about themselves. The strategy for the analysis was not decided in advance, but was developed over time in "the dance between empiry and theory" as first put by Wadel (1991).

3 Findings and discussion

To guide the reader into the material, we first present how Beate, a young woman in her mid-twenties, reflects on her past.

My past will of course always be with me. Mum was ill long before she got me, and I may have thought that many of the things Mum did were odd, but you get used to it – you think that this is my mum, this is how it should be. So I think that if I become a mother like her, that in fact I may not realize that I am manipulating my children or that I am not physically, but somehow mentally maltreating my children, then I am not certain that I want to have children and expose them to this. (..) My past is there regardless. But I do not dwell on these thoughts and think that if I had acted like this, what would have happened? Because this has happened. What has happened will always be part of oneself. This is how we get a personality. For example, I would not have been the person I am today if I had not moved away from Mum. And if I had gone

on living in an institution for any longer, instead of leaving, I would certainly have been different. So it is your past that has made you the person you are, and it is rather difficult to just say that, no, it is your past, and we can't do anything about that. (Beate)

Beate tells us about a past that weighs heavily upon her. The story she tells does not follow the customary pattern with a past that she can make use of or refer to as something positive that represents her in a way she wishes to present herself. Instead her past has connotations with certain disruptions in her life story due to conditions at home, which in our culture signals deviance. The way Beate talks about her past is two-fold. The past has made her the person she is today, but at the same time it has also moved her in other directions away from her origin. As Beate notes, she would not have been where she now finds herself if she had not been moved away from her mother, and if she had still been living in the institution. Beate's reflections on her ties with her origin and her movement towards something else touches on important questions in child welfare/social work related to self and transition from care.

3.1 The weight of the past as a central discourse

The youths in this material talk about themselves as linked to their past. This link is expressed in various ways as for example when Beate later tells in our interview: *"I am so afraid that I will be like Mum (..)"*. Beate says this in a situation where she has left the institution, after she has started living on her own, having a job, friends, and leisure time activities, and after having broken off contact with her mother. Based on assertions by Stein (2008), Beate could be said to represent the group "moving on" from care because she apparently is coping well. At the same time, she says that she is afraid of becoming like her Mum. In other words, the picture that Beate paints of herself has many facets. She copes with a lot of issues, but is afraid that her past will catch up with her. So afraid that she does not think she will ever have her own children, as she also states later in the interview. It is as though her mother is inside her, representing a risk and a force that can take her back to where she came from any second. In other words Beate talks through a specific discourse where she pictures herself as linked to the past.

This way of looking at her self as linked to blood, the biological inheritance, is common in the Western world (Howell and Melhus 2001). This culturally accepted way of understanding subjectivity, as linked to inheritance, is in this material expressed in various ways; as lack of personal limits, as a feeling of not having had a childhood or adolescence and as feelings of inferiority and shame connected to coming from less resourceful and more problematic families

than other "normal" youths. These issues are made crucial in the accounts and are characterized by the fact that they presented as irreversible. The young people talk of themselves within the discourse of *"the weight of the past"* where parents, their own choices and ways of living have assumed crucial significance for them. This has meant the young women and men in transition from care have had to deal with ties of origin from their pasts as well as movement towards something else in their futures. Storø (2005) found similar examples in his research, where young people expressed that moving away from their deviant past to a new situation meant going through a fundamental change, both according to how they lived and how they described themselves in the new situation. One of his research subjects, Anna, said it like this: *"There has always been mess in my family (...) but now I have lived away from them for five years, I have lived in another life".* Anna's account gives us a picture of how the past always is there, and a hint of what is demanded to move further.

3.2 The institutional focus on past and confession

In the child welfare institutions in Norway today there is an understanding of biography that points back to what happened in childhood as predominant (Storø 2001, Hjort 2003, Fransson 2009). This must be understood in relation to a context dominated by certain psychological theories that have been instrumental in the development of Norwegian child welfare institutions (Larsen 2004). Prominent among these have been therapeutic ideals assigned great significance to early interplay with significant others - especially the mother as well as later relational problems, etc. Also in other parts of this professional field, considerable weight seems to be put at defining clients in the light of their histories, rather than contemporary behaviour and function (Storø 2008a). It is in the past that damaged relationships and behaviour problems are understood to have their origins. By working with the pasts of young people and with support of the institution and the relationships offered there, milieu therapists in Norway aim to break vicious cycles of socially deviant behaviour patterns. From the perspective of the milieu therapist, the young person is understood both as being bound to their parents while as the same time open to change. This understanding includes the assumption that young people need their parents and therefore have to maintain contact with them while the youths live in the institution. At the same time the milieu therapists try to help these young persons regulate closeness and distance from their parents. In so doing, the child welfare institution takes on an ambiguous role involving contradictory tasks. On the one hand, these institutions have undoubtedly saved many young people from leading lives that could have been considerably worse by helping them develop new perspectives on their own lives. This includes

having given them a language that enables them to see their parents' otherness. At the same time, these institutions have tried to stimulate their contacts with their own parents.

One challenge for youths making the transition from care is the problem of deciding how to relate to their parents. This is actually a double challenge involving what appears to be the most central conflict of the transition itself focusing on the tension between anchor and extrication. The young people in Storø`s (2005) study often spoke of this ambiguous side of the transition where they sought both support and freedom. For young people leaving care this double-sided demand makes their transition differ from that of other young people because they often experience that they cannot take support for granted. These young people often reported feeling they could not build on the cultural values of their families in the transition (Storø 2005). Instead they reported feeling being more connected to the values of their public carers. This picture can be expanded by the findings of Jansen (2010) showing that young people leaving care seem to draw on expectations of normality in making themselves intelligible, but at the same time is not excused from a demand to explain their position, and how this position relates to normality discourses.

3.3 Transition from care is like coming to a new country

In their accounts, the young women and men interviewed often described the transition from institutions and the moves themselves as something new, and at the same time as being left to themselves. In one account, Anita says:

It is always problematic to move away from home. It is difficult and new. Like to be in vacation in a new country. Everything is new, you have to learn everything, you cannot trust people around you. You just have yourself.

In most cases the transition seemed to represent something qualitatively different and was often met with resistance:

Mark: *It was hell. I didn't want to leave, so I tried hard to delay it. When you are 18, you have to go, you're kinda thrown out then.*

Researcher: *What did you do next?*

Mark: *I said that I had to paint the flat, it is a mess, and I can't be bothered to move unless you fix that too. Always tried to find something wrong. I soon gave up, but it just turned out like this, kinda uncertain, I'm not*

used to living on my own, lots of new things and frustrations. So then I was forced to find myself.

I was forced to find my own self, Mark seems to be saying. He was not able to create a future for himself outside the institution, either as a direct prolonging of the life he had lived before he came into the institution or of the life he had in it. It is this lack of clarity that emerges as new and marks the turning point related to moving out. As we read the text, Mark is trying to construct himself in a new context. This interpretation emphasizes Stuart Hall's (2003) point that identity exists just as much in the future as in the past. Mark experiences himself neither as the person he was before he moved into the institution, nor as the person he was while he was there. He seems to be telling us of a movement that clarifies how the past is woven into his struggle to find himself. Mark continues:

When I moved into the institution I felt I was moving up, things were calmer and I enjoyed myself more. Since I moved out, everything has gone downhill all the time, with depression and irritation. I will have to find my balance, find out where I stand, I don't know where I stand now. I know that I can't go back to my mum. I can't cope with that. And I'm fed up with this.

In Mark's tell, it seems that the mother and the institution represent different types of past experiences. While the mother represents his problematic past, the institution seems to represent a movement he has been in and is still in. The fact that Mark talks about moving out as a turning point provides a picture of both his situation and the task ahead of him. Life in the institution and the emphasis put on change by the therapeutic culture has affected the way Mark now understands both himself and his past and this seems to give him choices about how to relate to various pasts. He tells us he knows that he can be a young boy who can be calm and happy. He has learnt that different situations affect him in different ways, and that relationships may evoke varying feelings. Not least, he has acquired space as well as a language making it possible for him to talk about feelings and his past. His experiences from the institution have given him power and strength, but also have positioned him at a crossroad relating to the question of how he can relate to his mother. When Mark tells us that he cannot go back to his mother, this can, within a post-structuralist perspective, be read as a battle of subject positioning. His choice of going on without his mother may be understood as referring both to another subject position where he can make his own choices but also reach a new interpretation of the relationship between himself and his mother. This can be

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seen as an interpretation making it impossible for him to return. As we shall see, this choice is a fundamental one, positioning him within the discourse "the weight of the past" as well as how he is actively relating to his past. The analysis of the material reveals three different ways of making the transition from care involving various modes of relating to past.

4 Three ways of dealing with the past

4.1 Transition through break with past after moving out of the institution

One way of relating to the past in the transition from care is to construct a break with it. The break is related to certain actions such as ceasing to use drugs, withdrawing from friends who use drugs but it also implies clarifying the positioning of the parents. A key set of characteristics of young people who had broken with their pasts in this material was that they were females and that they, both while living in the institution and after moving out, were using drugs relatively extensively or were in surroundings where there was widespread use of drugs. Few of them received after-care services. What they told in the interviews is that they, at some point after moving out, experienced dramatic turning points where they themselves decided to stop using drugs. Often this took place after having reached rock bottom and coming to a point where they had to decide either to her stop using drugs or to continue living a life with drug abuse. Vigdis, one of these women, tells that some time after moving out and following a period with extensive use of drugs, she managed to break out of the drug environment without any form of after-care support. Today Vigdis has a permanent job and is in the process of educating herself. Dealing with the past includes for her, as for others, marking a break with the past. She also has constructed a certain distance from her mother. Vigdis sometimes sees her but she does not count on her. Mari, another young women, says that even if she lives quite close to her parents she just talks with her parents on the telephone:

Researcher: *Do you have contact with your parents now?*

Mari: *Yes, I do. Although we almost never visit them any more. I think we have been there twice, but we chat on the phone very often. Especially with my mum.*

Mari is an example of a young woman who has not entirely broken the contact, but she has worked on regulating the relationship. This kind of regulation of parental contact was also found by Storø (2005). This may be viewed as a normal activity for all young people moving out of their childhood home. It is therefore possible to interpret regulation of contact as a part of any young man or

woman`s normalisation project as illustrated in an example from a group interview with young women:

Mona is 27 years old, has 2 children, a partner and a job. She left the institution in the middle of the 9ᵗʰ grade (about 16 years old). Moved home and finished 9ᵗʰ grade. She is one of the girls who have managed to stop taking drugs. She wants her children to have a natural relationship to alcohol. She would like her children to see that one can drink "a glass of beer or white wine with the meal of shrimps on Saturday evening". At the same time she emphasizes that her children smell it on her breath as soon as she takes one sip of beer. She had a mother who drank, but knows that she does not want to end up like her.

As we see, Mona operates with very sharp limits for what she now regards as normal and, on the other hand, what she regards as undesirable and abnormal behaviour. The text shows how Mona has developed rules for the use of alcohol and rituals connected with wellbeing and enjoyment that differ from what she herself experienced as a child. It is possible to interpret the regulation of contact with parents as part of her new subject position as a normal young woman. But this picture can also be viewed as involving something more complex. It seems that the normalisation project to a certain degree is connected to an irreversible emancipation project where the parents are understood as "useless" as partners in the young person's independence project. If so, the young person's striving to be normal can be said to include abnormal activities, such as conducting a break with the parents. This raises the question whether there are some ways of making these transitions more irreversible than others. It could be suggested that transitions involving clear breaks with parents are more irreversible than other types of transitions (Storø 2005). The paradox is that members of the groups experiencing these kinds of transitions received less after care support than the following group in the material.

4.2 Transition through continuous change

Men and women who talk about changes that started while they were living in the institution illustrate another way of dealing with the past in transition from care. Unlike the former group these young people have not primarily had a dramatic break after moving out, but more of a continuous process of change. After the transition they have concentrated on staying on the same track that they had been on for a long time. They have taken the consequences of their earlier choices from the time they stayed in the institution and, for example continued to regulate contact with their families. Their work on themselves after moving out is, so to speak, a continuation of a change that started much earlier. Both inside the institution and after moving out, these young people have followed up

plans of action, have been given and accepted help have worked with themselves and have made use of the support offered. Most of them were offered after-care support and their relationship with child welfare services is characterised by communication, confidence and contact. As Morten, a young man, recalled in the interview:

After I had moved out, I lived in a flat where there was "training for living". As I had never lived on my own before, they wanted to know how things were going. And I wanted this too. It is optional and they had a flat at their disposal. One can live there for anything from a few months to a year, and in fact I lived there for more than one year, at least 1½ year. One can perhaps call this a form of after-care, because you are followed up, and can talk to anyone whenever you want. There was no night service that you could phone, but I suppose it is a kind of after-care. It is a kind of safety net to ensure that you can function normally when you move out on your own. Anyone at all, everyone, is offered this, whether they need it or not. And I wanted to try it out. I wanted to live on my own, but with contact with them. In a way, it was the after-care that I got. It usually functioned very well. It really did. I learnt new ways of preparing food. I can now heat a frozen pizza in the oven! [laughter], no, I was really taught more complicated things.

Morten's text is about a planned moving out in dialogue with the institution where he was followed up. Here the after care support appears as a prolongation of the institution which can be viewed as a support for youths in their respective projects of moving towards integrated subject positions. We interpret this to imply that this young man represents a group of young people that child welfare services believe in. The institution has succeeded in working with them and the child welfare services also have determined that these young persons are worthy of receiving help after they have moved out. Also in these accounts we find a break, or regulation, of the relationship with the parents.

Beate: *I have kinda cut off all contact with my mum.*
Researcher: *You have no contact with your mother?*
Beate: *No, I have talked to her three times after I moved out. Once on the phone, when all she said was "I don't know why you are phoning me, you aren't my daughter. I only make life difficult for you, and you make life difficult for me, so why have contact?" And she has also visited me a few times at work. Twice she has paid at my cashier's station, but not*

> *said anything. However, after I moved I have had a lot of contact with*
> *the other members of my family. My father and brothers and sisters.*

From the text extracts we see that Beate has broken off contact with her mother and the mother with her, while she, at the same time, regulates the relationship to her father, his family, and also her siblings. The text tells us that a lot has happened in Beate's life from the time she moved into the institution until she left it. The break with her mother and the forms of regulation of contact that Beate outlines in the text have taken place over time and long were a subject for discussion while she was living in the institution. A common feature of the young people who tell us about change over time is that they are in a situation they can cope with, in spite of struggles and problems. They are now in school, at work or at home with children. These texts also contain normalisation discourses, with a particular focus on self-realisation. The young women and men in this group want to emphasize the importance of own choices, of having projects, and of progression.

4.3 Transition as a way of dealing with risk of further problems in their lives

Some of the young people struggled to maintain a certain level of functioning in their independent lives. In their accounts the main topic is continuity and working to remain where they are and prevent further deterioration. Many of the young people regard the institution as the stable factor in their lives and sometimes also talk about the periods when they lived there as highlights of their lives. Knut is one of these young men. He is struggling to combine a life both as an employee and as a drug addict. The distance between these two lives is large, and he says that he needs to collect himself and start a project that pulls him in one direction. When Knut looks at himself and his situation, he often despairs at the thought of continuing on the same track, but does not know how he can make a change. He has lost his after-care support because he did not keep agreements and now feels he is in an impossible situation. Knut struggles with the everyday routines requiring him to day the same things each day. He is torn between having one foot in the drug environment and the other in working life:

> *Knut:* *It is a struggle to get up in the morning. It is not easy, it is difficult to cut out*
> *drugs when I have not done this before. It was a bit the same when I came into*
> *the institution, which I regarded as being "adults against young people", we did*
> *what we wanted. I wouldn't like to say that they didn't try to help and that I*
> *accepted this, because I can't quite remember how it was. They did try to help,*

but I was young, stupid: so it did no good. It is kinda difficult to think about this
now, because all I can remember is that I didn't manage school. I was suddenly
thrown here and there, thrown out of child welfare for no reason – suddenly
right out. Much of what I needed help for is to kinda be able to see that I should
be responsible, things like that. I kinda look forward to having a family and
house and job and things like that, but I kinda haven't got that far yet.

After leaving the institution, Knut has tried to keep things going by combining life on drugs and a straight life. He separates these two lives completely, and his family does not know that he is on drugs. While Knut is one of those who tries to balance so as to avoid further problems, it is typical of most of the others in this group that they are out of work and not being educated. Their work with themselves consists of making the best of the situation. Many of them have irregular living conditions, and their accounts show that they usually spend time with other young women and men who also find themselves in risky circumstances. In contrast to the other accounts, this group shows less focus on hegemonic normality. On the other hand these young men and women are seeking normality in specific, and for them, important fields. They are as interested as others in having friends, love affairs and taking part in life. Like many others, they dream of having a family, and, with time, children. The accounts of these young people show how problematic life can be for those who move out of an institution, and how dependent they are on the welfare state, although their interests are in stark contrast to expectations of participation and of being regarded as worthy clients (Villadsen, 2000; Egelund 2003). They are heavily weighed down by their pasts, and everyday life for them consists mostly of a series of hit and miss activities. They try to avoid slipping off the track too often. Their social security benefits are usually spent as soon as they arrive, which often results in difficult financial positions with the danger of being thrown out of their living arrangements, as well as problems with a regular social activities and no opportunities to save money or plan for the future. Within this subject position, changing seems difficult. Characteristic for these accounts is that the break and regulation of their relationship to their family is less present. The relationships are more often talked about as a continuation of how it always has been. Dignity is thus talked about as important. Worthiness is connected with being treated with respect, to be an OK person, someone who has friends, and someone who takes part in society and does not let others trample on one's self. This work on own subject construction should not be underestimated, as it is impossible to create worthiness alone. A subject position such as theirs, outside the "regular life", makes worthiness a value that these young women and men have to work hard at getting. These young people are all trying to find out which framework now applies and to discover the

meaning of everyday life. With one exception, all of them stand outside the world of work. This means that they have to spend a lot of time and energy solving practical problems, such as finding a place to live, getting to the social services office, coming to various appointments with the municipal child welfare and social services, as well as adjusting to complicated family relationships. They also have to work extremely hard to get positive recognition from others.

5 Conclusions and implications

We have shown that young people who have lived in child welfare institutions in Norwegian society talk about themselves and their transitions through the discourse "the weight of the past". But they do not relate passively to this discourse. In this article we have presented a post-structural perspective in the hope of bringing forth new and diverse stories about the transition from care. By focusing how constructions of self and past are done by care-leavers and much influenced by certain values such as the biological link between parents and children, we have shed light on how the youths in various ways relate to their problematic pasts in making these kinds of transitions. Their accounts are providing new perspectives on policies, practices and research within the field of child welfare in general and transitions from care to society at large in particular. According to Biggart and Walther (2006) transitions to adulthood are more de-standardised and less linear today than at earlier times. This suggests that transitions are more individualised and that individual choices are increasingly highlighted. The young people participating in this study told important stories about how they both have been captured in various ways in the discourse "the weight of the past", but also have been actively relating to their pasts. One set of lessons from this research is that practitioners should work toward establishing contacts with young people who are actively constructing understandings of their past and how these constructs differ from person to person. This help make it possible to come closer to each individual young person`s transition project as well as to explore with them the possibilities inherent in these projects. One obvious implication for policy is that these kinds of orientation should help strengthen individually oriented practice. Moreover, this also underscores the importance of providing youth in care with conditions giving them ample time and space for transitional processes in contrast to what many, care leavers report experiencing, namely, compressed and accelerated transitions (Stein 2008). More research should also be done to reveal the actual activities of young people during processes of transition. This could contribute to a broader understanding of how these processes could be guided in positive directions helping young people in their various projects of selfhood and self-worth.

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