Milestones and Challenges: Investigating Life Course of Young Women with Disabilities who grew up in Foster Families

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Abstract

This paper refers to the project Quali –TYDES, GA ČR No. P407/11/2009. Aim of the project is to investigate and explain how developments in European, national/local policies are impacting on the lives of young disabled adults. By combining qualitative longitudinal methods (life stories) with critical policy analysis, the project aims to generate a comparative understanding of European, national/local regimes in relation to disability and family. This paper sought to understand life course of young females with disabilities who grow up in foster families. Careful attention is paid at 2 key categories: turning points, resources and capital. The findings show that young females with disabilities participating in the study identified their experience of being accepted by their foster families as the most important turning point during their life course. Similarly support provided to them by their foster families was identified as a crucial life course element related to category resources and capital.

1. Introduction

The aim of this paper is to present one segment of the study arising from the post-structuralistic theory and constructivist paradigm. By combining qualitative research methods and critical analysis of institutional processes we collect knowledge based on life experiences and aspirations of young adults with disabilities living in the Czech Republic. We are seeking an answer to the question of how institutional processes (macro environment) affect the lives of young people with disabilities. Power influences and institutional processes have been the subject of theoretical and practice-oriented research in the last decades in the social sciences (Šiška 2005, 2008). The UN Convention (UNCRPD) raises hopes and challenges. It places new obligations on states to

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protect and promote disabled people’s rights and equality in all areas of life including community living and accessibility of infrastructure.

The Czech Republic as an EU member provides a focus for two reasons. First, Europe has emerged as a disability policy entrepreneur promoting rights-based approaches and transnational policy instruments. The European co-ordination of disability policy, via a High Level Group of state representatives, includes the 27 EU Member States, Iceland and Norway. The UN Convention is the first international rights treaty ever signed by the EU. The Czech Republic has ratified the convention and is now developing a Disability Strategy. Deinstitutionalisation of social services is a significant aspect of the Disability Strategy. However, in the Czech Republic progress from institutional care towards family and community based services is far from satisfactory (Vann & Šiška, 2011).

Focusing on qualitative exploration of life course through respondents own life stories allows us to identify specific structural factors that cause events along the way (Šiška & Vann, 2007). However exploring life course is not a new phenomenon. In sociology it appeared already in 1920 as symbolic interactionism. Using symbolic interactionism and social research, together with evaluation of individual interaction implies a need to explore experiences of respondents in order to understand and describe their symbolic world. Goodley (1996) adds that our life story, our chosen form of narrative reveals a lot about individual and collective, about private and public, and about real and imaginary world (Goodley in Smith, Sparkes, 2008).

Our research approach draws on Priestley’s “individual-biographical” and “structural-normative” models of disability (Priestley, 2001, 2003, Quali-Tydes Research Proposal, 2009). In the life course four key concepts are distinguished - pathways, trajectories, turning points, resources and capital. The project offers a number of key developments: evidence of the impact of a move to community based support in a country currently going through the process. It demonstrates how qualitative case studies can be used in monitoring the implementation of international policy. The focus of the study is on those with mild disabilities but the findings of this study will add to the existing knowledge base related to measuring outcomes for people with disability in general in order to develop a range of tools that can be used to ensure a good life in the community for all, including those with the most complex disabilities.

1.1 Pathways
Our study is closely linked to life course theory and development of qualitative methods analysis. Our biographical research design and the life course theory seek to understand pathways, events and situations in which an individual goes through during his or her life.

1.2 Trajectories
Trajectory is understood as a direction in which the life of an individual is moving or should move. This category is based on the assumption that in everyone's life there are certain "forces". These “forces” have an impact on our lives. In some way they change our life course directions. Trajectory is important for us as it allows us to seek to analyse interaction between life aspirations on an individual on one hand and barriers to fulfill such aspirations on the other.

1.3 Resources and capital
Resources and capital is understood as an umbrella term for support that people call up to make changes in their life journey. It can be an educational, social or cultural capital, family support, but also a wider social network.

2 Findings
In our project we interviewed 5 young females with disabilities who had been placed as infants to institutions but later grew up in foster families. Age of our respondents varied from 18 up to 33 years. 1 respondent had visual impairment, 3 respondents had physical disabilities and 1 had learning disability.

In our paper we aim to illustrate two of the concepts studied: turning points, and capital and resources. Interviews revealed that having a family background (foster family) was regarded as the most significant turning point in their lives. Feeling of acceptance by the foster family members; having their own home were seen as the most important moment throughout their entire life. Jana expressed it as follows: "... it was a big change for me to be in the family, the basic change, to have mom, dad and siblings. That was probably the most major thing..." (Seg. TP.3.214). Other interviewee also referred to a similar situation: "Well, it was certainly the first thing, so that I actually met my biological ... so like a foster family that I have a full family" (Seg. TP.1.299).

Some interviewees reported about their experiences of looking for their biological families and meeting them. One young woman Michaela reported: "... finding my biological family ... actually changed my life a lot ..." (Seg. TP.3.215). Meeting biological parents and siblings, and having opportunity to talk with them about reasons for putting them as little children to institutional care was seen by our interviewees as a challenge. However any of our interviewees did not establish a deeper or regular relationship with their biological parents.

In relation to category recourses and capital it was clear that the foster parents played a significant role in the lives of all young women interviewed.

Jana’s foster parents supported her to be independent as much as she needed. Jana also reported that her foster parents expressed their willingness to support her as long as she needed. Jana appreciated it and commented: "... our mother and father told me that if I want, I can stay with them as long as I need ..." (Seg. T.1.167). Martina described her gratitude to her parents who have cared after her. Martina also reported that after being accepted by the foster family, her health significantly improved. : "... well, we immediately started with rehabilitation. We exercised a lot and on a daily basis, so thanks to them I am now as I am" (Seg. R.4.34). "...they looked for different types of devices to enable me to study and attend school ..." (Seg. R.4.52).

Michaela’s mother quitted her job to become a housewife to be able to take care of her daughter and to support her: "... actually my mom stopped going to work, though she gave up the opportunity to work in order to be with me all the time, because my health situation required that" (Seg.R.3.34). Michaela described her mother is a person to whom she can rely on in every moment of her life.

Jitka’s (with visual impairment) foster mother produced tactile textbooks. She also produced a large amount of tactile images. The foster mother sought to ensure that her daughter had as playful and inspiring textbooks similar to classmates without visual impairment.

Jana, young woman with physical impairment talked about how her foster father was important for her. The foster father made their house accessible for her so she could be more independent. Besides accessible entrance to the house Jana mentioned also accessible bathroom and other floors of the house (Seg. R1.22).

Interviewees often mentioned also other members of their foster such as siblings. Jana perceived a large family as a great advantage. She explained that if she needed help she always found someone in the family who helped and listened to her (Seg. R.1.28). Jana had an older sister with same type of disability as she had. She considered it as a great advantage and opportunity to share their experiences and to support each other: "It's nice that I am not the only one with disability. I feel I'm not alone, that we are two on that" (Seg. R.1.38).

Support provided by foster families played a significant role during the life course of all interviewees. Martina reported that whenever she needed help, she always felt to be supported and accepted by her foster family. When asked who had the greatest influence on her life, she said: "I've always enjoyed my home, so it was a support of my foster parents" (Seg. R.4.308).

† Shift from institutional care towards systematic support of foster care is an issue currently discussed among both professionals and general public in the Czech Republic The Czech Republic still has a relatively high number of children growing up in institutions and in international comparison (Siska, J. Latimier. C., 2011).
3 Conclusions

The aim of this paper was to present a segment of our project focusing on life courses of young women with disabilities who grow up in foster families.

Attention was primarily paid to two categories - turning points; resources and capital. The findings show that experience of being accepted by foster families was clearly a major turning point for all our respondents. Two interviewees later decided to find and meet their biological families to learn why their biological parents surrendered them. Such experience can be also regarded as a significant turning point all respondents felt gratitude to their foster parents, whom they regarded as their only parents.

Permanent support provided by foster families to our interviewees such in education, home living, emotional life is an example of a category resources and capital.

References


