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Agency in transition – a qualitative longitudinal approach to processes of leaving care

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Abstract: Based on the example of a single case, taken from a sample of 16 cases in the frame of a research project in Luxembourg, we will demonstrate how agency can be analysed from a relational perspective using a longitudinal case study approach. This approach sheds light on the relevance of changing social constellations in the process of young care leavers transitioning into adulthood and situates agency in relational constellations and relationships. Through this analysis, we hope to strengthen the argument for a relational professionalism (Köngeter, 2009) that recognises, understands and respects the needs, resources and perspectives of young people in relations and constellations, and the interconnectedness of these relations. We further argue for a power-sensitive perspective that questions and overcomes boundaries with the aim of broadening scopes of action and enabling spaces, both for the young care leavers themselves and the professionals supporting these young people – a perspective that also implies policy engagement (Gal & Weiss-Gal, 2023).

Keywords: leaving care; relational agency; transition to adulthood; youth welfare services; qualitative longitudinal approach

1 Introduction

The objective of our paper is to show how a qualitative, longitudinal case study approach can shed light on the changing social constellations in the process of young care leavers transitioning into adulthood, and the agency therein. Based on the example of a single case, we will demonstrate how agency can be analysed from a relational perspective. A relational analysis focuses on interactional patterns and relational constellations that enable and address specific forms of agency, both for the young people concerned and for the professionals. Agency is thus embedded in, and part of, relations and constellations. Our analysis shows that it is important to look at the changing constellations, and to also include institutional contexts, roles and practices, and not only specific social relationships that are experienced as either supportive or not. The insights from the case study further support the argument for relational professionalism (Köngeter, 2009) in practice, and for border/boundary work (Kessl & Maurer, 2009, 2012) that is aware of power relations and powerful border constructions in society with the aim of changing them to broader scopes of action with "the intention of liberation" (Kessl & Maurer, 2012, p. 2).

We start with a brief look at the state of research on leaving care, with the main focus on relational approaches to agency. We will then explain our theoretical frame, followed by the methodology and a description of the Luxembourgish context. The analysis of the case of

Sam[1] is structured alongside the temporal process of leaving care, elaborating the changing constellations and the relational agency therein. In the discussion, we will connect the results to the concepts of relational professionalism and boundary work.

2 State of research

Studies on the outcomes after leaving care, e.g. on occupation and employment (Wade & Dixon, 2006), parenthood (Dworsky & Courtney, 2010; Matta Oshima et al., 2013), housing (Wade & Dixon, 2006), delinquency, (psychosocial) health and well-being (Akister et al., 2010; Baidawi et al., 2014; Dixon, 2008; Stein & Dumaret, 2011) and substance use disorders (Jones, 2011; Narendorf & McMillen, 2010), emphasise that care leavers are a vulnerable group. Despite their often difficult situations, they have to manage transitions into adulthood in an accelerated and densified way (e.g. Stein, 2014). These studies give important insights for the development of social services and for social policy.

Other studies focus more on the processes of transitioning out of residential and foster care, and how the young people concerned can be supported by elaborating concepts such as, for example, readiness (Benbenishty & Schiff, 2009; Benbenishty & Zeira, 2012), (relational or interactional), resilience (Stein, 2008; Van Breda et al., 2012), turning points (Höjer & Sjöblom, 2014; Pinkerton & Rooney, 2014; Zeller, 2014) and social support (e.g. Hiles et al., 2013; Refaeli et al., 2017). These concepts also often include implicit aspects of agency such as making sense of one's life, taking control over the circumstances of life or being orientated towards the future (cf. an overview: Karl et al., 2020; Lunz, 2021; Peters & Zeller, 2020).

Against this backdrop, questions on how agency can be achieved, even under difficult circumstances and taking into consideration disadvantageous and adverse life situations, have become increasingly explicitly addressed in research on processes of leaving care. Recent theoretical concepts of (relational) agency (e.g. Bakketeig & Backe-Hansen, 2018; Bengtsson et al., 2020; Göbel et al., 2019, 2020; Gundersen, 2021; Karl et al., 2020; Marion et al., 2017; Munford & Sanders, 2015; Peters & Zeller, 2020) facilitate an understanding of the interrelatedness of the material and social worlds and environments in co-producing situational agency. Additionally, concepts of relational agency are gaining ground in childhood studies (Eßer et al., 2016).

While initially, the goal in the international context was described as independent living (Donkoh et al., 2006), independency or autonomy, these relational approaches to leaving care emphasise the importance of social relationships and networks, and underline the existential interdependency of people that should be taken into consideration in practical programmes fostering leaving care processes (Antle et al., 2009; Atkinson & Hyde, 2019; Karl, 2025; Propp et al., 2003).

In our paper, we explicitly focus on researching agency in the process of leaving care, thus providing a conceptual notion of understanding agency in its relationality and as embedded in changing constellations of people, and institutional and material realities.

3 A relational perspective on agency and transitions

Concepts of agency are especially used in researching transitions both of young people and during the life course (Elder, 1994; Raithelhuber, 2011). This is not surprising, as within

[1] "Sam" is a pseudonym.

transitions, the social context and scopes of action underlie rapid changes, which raises the question of how people cope with these changes, how they make sense of them and how they achieve agency. Concepts of agency within social work research raise central questions about social work theory – for example, "how can people be seen as actors of their social worlds?" and "how is individual and collective agency socially enabled, formed and determined?" (Scherr, 2013; translation by the authors). The terminology of agency in social work in a very broad sense attempts to describe individuals as socially embedded and formed subjects whose abilities and ways of acting are, however, never fully determined (Scherr, 2013).

In our research we adopt a relational–transactional stance on agency. This understanding of agency attempts to avoid an essentialist understanding of it in which individuals are either seen as autonomously acting subjects and structures as a result of social actions or as determined by social structures that exercise coercion over individuals. Many scholars in relational sociology try to overcome a dualistic or substantialist understanding of the structure–agency problem (Altissimo et al., n.d.; Dépelteau, 2013), focusing not on entities such as the subject, the institution or organisation, or social structures, but on the processes of how structures, organisations, actors, institutions and artefacts are constituted and constitute themselves in relations, how agency is achieved and how power relations are enacted. Agency is thus a quality of social relations and distributed in networks (Eßer & Sitter, 2018). Such a perspective also tries to avoid a perspective in which activity, the voluntaristic action and the active, controlling, forming or autonomous subject is the norm (cf. this critique: Dépelteau, 2013; Eßer & Sitter, 2018).

Our analysis is informed by the pragmatist perspective of Emirbayer and Mische (1998, p. 963), who conceptualise

> "human agency as a temporally embedded process of social engagement, informed by the past, (in its habitual aspect), but also oriented towards the future (as a capacity to imagine alternative possibilities) and towards the present (as a capacity to contextualize past habits and future projects with the contingencies of the moment)".

The question therefore is "[h]ow […] social actors [are]… capable (at least in principle) of critically evaluating and reconstructing the conditions of their own lives" (Emirbayer & Mische, 1998, p. 964).

Although they underline the relevance "*of different structural environments – the temporal-relational contexts of action*" (Emirbayer & Mische, 1998, p. 970), and that actors reproduce and transform "those structures in interactive response to the problems posed by changing historical situations" (Emirbayer & Mische, 1998, p. 970), we should be aware that contexts are not there per se but through the relational–temporal engagement of people, and through the processes of valuing and meaning giving of these socially embedded actors. Biesta and Tedder (2006, 2007) develop further the aspect of agency as an achievement by starting from the basic concept of Emirbayer and Mische:

> "[T]he idea of achieving agency makes it possible to understand why an individual can be agentic in one situation but not in another. It moves the explanation away, in other words, from the individual and locates it firmly in the transaction (which also implies that the achievement in one situation does not mean that it will necessarily be achieved in other situations as well). (…) [T]he answer to the question how agency is achieved ultimately depends on the transactions of individuals with particular situations, within particular ecologies" (Biesta & Tedder, 2006, p. 18f.).

Attempting to avoid possible individualistic shortcomings of the concept of Emirbayer and Mische (1998), Biesta and Tedder (referring to Hannah Arendt) situate agency in the process of social action: "[T]he achievement of agency is not an achievement of the agent alone but of the agent-in-interaction-with-others" (Biesta & Tedder, 2006, p. 24). The actor therefore is not a single agent but an interactant, a perspective on agency that also takes the interrelations and interdependencies between interactants into consideration (Burkitt, 2016; Gundersen, 2021). This "ecological" understanding of agency "always encompasses actors-in-transaction-with-context, actors acting by-means-of-an-environment rather than simply in an environment" (Biesta & Tedder, 2006, p. 18). With regard to biographical–narrative data, it is important to analyse the entire constellation in which different forms of agency (in terms of practices) and agentic orientations are achieved as a quality of these relations, i.e. to understand achieving agency as an embedded and situated process in constellations with their fostering and hindering factors and relationships.

By situating the 'creation' of 'successful' and meaningful 'relations' in interactions, we understand the young person as a 'young person in relation with or to...'. Social situations and conditions are not conceived as something "outside" but as being enacted in transactions with, for example, material environments, people, the biographical history of vulnerability as a quality of relations etc., in which subjectivities and identity constructions arise at the same time.

Such a relational–ecological understanding of agency bears in mind that power is a feature of relations. Power relations bring forward and permeate societal discourses and programmes, institutions and organisations, and both subjectivisation processes and identity constructions (Karl, 2014). They also draw boundaries – within and through discourses and the material world (Kessl & Maurer, 2009). At the same time, inherent in power relations are possibilities of change, resistance, critique and critical deconstruction of boundaries (Foucault, 1987; Kessl & Maurer, 2012).

These possibilities of critique and social change are important as social work is linked with practical problems and takes a normative stance towards the search for a better life and better living conditions for all. In the discussion we therefore ask how the results of the analysis provide hints for improving social services, for critical reflexivity and boundary work, and a relational professionalism that is orientated towards the liberation of people, and the expansion of scopes of action. In doing so, we will also show how a relational analysis of agency can contribute to reflexivity in social work practice and research.

4 Methodology: a qualitative longitudinal approach to analysing transitioning processes

A qualitative longitudinal approach offers the opportunity to analyse transitions, e.g. processes of leaving care and changes of constellations (Bengtsson et al., 2020; Gundersen, 2021; Jäde et al., 2021; Lunz, 2021; Witzel, 2010), as well as the movement in time and space (Holland et al., 2006) within constellations, and their dynamics and changes without any specific beginning or ending (Welzer, 1993). Therefore, researching transitions is always open-ended and further research would bring more insights, which means that the validity of the results can always be requestioned (Henderson et al., 2012; Thomson et al., 2003). The data allow both a cross-sectional and a longitudinal comparison (Asbrand et al., 2013). This complexity offers the opportunity to research the moments and sequences of movement (Felden, 2010, p. 34) in their temporality (Witzel, 2010), and agency within these transition

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processes (Holland et al., 2006). Thus, agency can be researched as a relational construct considering the situational, temporal and processual dynamics of the transition processes.

With this approach, transitions can be captured as a moment of fluid movement (Lunz, 2021); however, there needs to be an understanding of "then" and "now" to track the changes withing these constellations of transitions (Bengtsson et al., 2020; Gundersen, 2021; Saldana, 2003, p. 7; Witzel, 2010). Time is an implicit feature of research, but it might also be explicitly mentioned (Thomson et al., 2003), and it is understood as something that the interviewee defines when referring to it. By following interviewees over a period of time, as in qualitative longitudinal studies (Bengtsson et al., 2020; Jäde et al., 2021; Lunz, 2021), one can see changes within the transitions in the time frame in which they appear, the so-called 'real time' (Saldana, 2003). Hence, the relations in which agency is (re)produced and embedded can be captured from the present point of view as well as both pro- and retrospectively. By contrasting these views, one can see how agency is achieved in different ways, and how, in the flow of time, meaning making with regard to different biographical situations might be nuanced within the processes of leaving care.

However, researching transitions with follow-up interviews raises several ethical challenges. First, it requires becoming involved in a research-related relationship to build up a trustful environment in the interview in order to encourage open narratives (Witzel, 2010). Second, the relationship supports the sample maintenance for the follow-ups. The contact data must be kept and reused, which requires careful data management (Henderson et al., 2006). A third challenge concerns how one can create a good relationship and maintain relatively close contact over a period of time without making the young people feel rejected and misrecognised when the project is over. The researcher–interviewee relationship is temporal and limited, which means that a relationship is built up and ends again, a situation that specifically young people leaving care experience often in their out-of-home placements as leaving care is a process that includes several disruptions and discontinuities. The trustful interviewee–researcher relationship also encompasses the danger of so-called "going native" (Witzel, 2010, p. 297). Hence, the potential harm of qualitative longitudinal research has to be considered carefully, and the researcher has to reflect on his or her role throughout the process (Jäde et al., 2021; Lunz, 2021; Witzel, 2010).

Although researching transitions through qualitative longitudinal studies offers an approach to follow the changes and transformations within these processes, not many have been carried out to date (Bengtsson et al., 2020; Jäde et al., 2021; Lunz, 2021). Our study was part of the "Young People's Transitions out of Residential and Foster Care – TransCare" (2015–2019) project based at the University of Luxembourg.[2] Semi-structured interviews (Flick, 2012) with very open narration generating questions at the beginning of the interview were conducted on three occasions (t1–t3).

Interviews were conducted six months before leaving care with 16 care leavers (t1, n = 16), immediately after leaving care with nine care leavers (t2, n = 9) and nine months after leaving care with another nine care leavers (t3, n = 9). In total, eight care leavers were interviewed on all three occasions (t1–t3, n = 8) and 34 interviews were conducted over a period of 23

[2] TransCare has received funding from the Luxembourgish Fonds National de la Recherche under Grant Agreement No. C14/SC/7837180/TransCare/Karl/Peters. Ethical Approval was given by the Ethics Review Panel of the University of Luxembourg under number ERP-15-036.

months. The field approach was adopted through so-called "gatekeepers" (e.g. Jäde et al., 2021, p. 138) – in this case, social workers from the institutions where the young people lived.

We analysed the data as socially and temporally situated narrations, in which the self positions him-/herself within the life course and thus in past, present and (imagined) future constellations and relationships in which agency is achieved as a quality of these constellations and relationships (Gundersen, 2021). Using the methodology of grounded theory (Strauss & Corbin, 1990; Strübing, 2008), the data were densified (Reichertz, 2013) and interview sequences were thoroughly reconstructed. The results for the whole sample show three contrasting transition processes out of residential care, where the case of Sam is used as an example to illustrate the transition from a "stable to an insecure" situation.[3]

5 Leaving care in Luxembourg

Since 2008, and with the law "Aide á l'Enfance et á la Famille" (AEF, "Help for Childhood and Families"), the field of residential and foster care in Luxembourg has undergone major changes (Lunz & Jäger, 2018). New services, including supported housing for young people leaving care, have been established. For the first time, transitions out of care have grown in importance, both institutionally and professionally. And recently again, Luxembourg has undergone major reforms towards a more family-, child- and youth-focused orientation, including the fusion of the law on child protection (Loi du 10 août 1992 relative à la protection de la jeunesse) and the AEF, while establishing for the first time a law on juvenile justice ("Droit pénal pour mineurs") for young people aged 14 and over. Coming from a strong legal frame of child protection and an interventionist approach, the ongoing reforms target a more family-orientated and help-based approach that strengthens the idea that parents and young people seek help voluntarily. These reforms are based on the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (Le Gouvernement du Grand-Duché de Luxembourg, Ministère de l'Éducation nationale, de l'Enfance et de la Jeunesse & Ministère de la Justice, 2022).

In the course of the implementation of the AEF, the process of leaving care was formalised in the sense of contractual management. Approaching the age of maturity, young people have to write a project on planning how they are going to achieve autonomy (Projet d'Autonomisation), including the formulation of goals and life projects. This project is the basis for being granted another three years after having turned 18, e.g. to live in supported housing. One important constraint is that a young person must still be in education, training or an apprenticeship, as without such institutional involvement, young people are not entitled to be financed within the framework of the AEF. The Revenue d'Inclusion Sociale (RIS) (formerly the Revenue Minimum Garanti (RMG)) is not granted to people under the age of 25, and students' allowances are also only available for students (Göbel et al., 2021). Only in specific situations, such as parenthood or a diagnosed psychosocial disorder, can young people under 25 profit from a specific kind of RIS. As housing is extremely expensive and

[3] The results of this transition course show that in the first interviews, young people are keen on moving out of the care institution and projecting themselves into the future. Shortly after moving out, they begin to face insecurities and challenges in changing institutional constellations, and distance themselves from care institutions. The results of the third interviews show numerous challenges appearing in the constellations of transitions that illustrate how care leavers are struggling to achieve agency within complex institutional landscapes. The other types of transitions are "from uncertainty to a situation that brings new chances" and a so-called "constant transition process", which are not further elaborated in this article. The three types of transitions have been derived from the changes of agency construction within the transitions out of residential care (Lunz, 2021).

young people leaving care often do not have a family to rely on, they are at a high risk of homelessness.

6 Case study: transitioning as a process of increasingly restricted constellations, missing links and a loss of voice

We have chosen the case of Sam from our sample as it shows how the constellations in the process of leaving residential care for assisted living increasingly lack opportunities for agency. Although Sam tries to do his best to control his life situation, the constellations become more and more difficult and disabling for him while the number of social service providers increases. This case shows, in a very pointed way, the interdependency of different (institutional) actors and contexts, and the missing links between them (residential care, school, assisted living, psychological treatment, family and different social services), which leads to a paralysis within the constellation. It further elicits how supportive and trustful relationships with professionals are interrupted and connections to the family of origin are forced on the young person when moving out of the residential care setting to a more independent form of living.

When the first interview took place (t1), Sam was 18 years old and on the point of moving out of the residential care setting (group arrangement) to accompanied housing. The second interview took place seven months later (t2), and the third interview another eight months after that (t3), which means that the transitioning process and the changing constellations were followed by the researcher over a period of 15 months.

Stable and trustful relationships in the present in the residential care setting, coping with the past and having plans for the future (t1)

At the time of the first interview, Sam was still in residential care, a context in which he feels at home:

> Sam: (.) [(laughing) normal] No/Yes, actually good but (.) actually, it would be better if my family situation was NORMAL and I lived at home, but (..) I really like it here, also concerning the social pedagogues here, I actually feel like at home. I actually do not say "foyer" [explanation by the authors: residential care home in Luxembourg], I actually always say: "I am coming home (.) yes". (Interview at t1; translation by the authors)[4]

In contrast to his experiences in his family of origin, Sam has learnt to build up a trustful relationship with a social pedagogue from the residential care institution without being judged. He also has trustful relationships with his peers and still goes to school. With regard to his family of origin, he keeps in contact with his father and his sister but does not expect too much and seeks to master his life on his own without being dependent on them.

Sam has several hobbies and ways of calming down and feeling well and at one with life – for example, he takes part in several sporting and artistic activities, and enjoys lying in the meadow and looking up at the sky to be in the moment. He also enjoys staying abroad during holidays.

[4] Bold letters mean "emphasise", "(.)" marks a micro pause and "[]" are remarks by the authors, including stage directions.

For him, reaching "autonomy" – and this is in line with the institutional perspective – means mastering daily life (learning, cooking, cleaning and washing clothes). He is ambivalent, but optimistic, about moving out and is confident of finding an apprenticeship training position in the near future. He experiences self-efficacy to some degree with regard to mastering his life, the school and his psychodynamics. However, his perspective on living alone in a flat without others is double-edged: on the one hand, he is looking forward to having more privacy, but on the other hand, there will not always be someone there when he comes home. Therefore, he sees assisted living for young people as a good institutional frame as social workers check in and still look after them while they have a flat on their own and more privacy.

Loss of trustful relationships with professionals, difficulties in relating to the social services system, orientation mostly towards the present to master life, but having plans for the future (t2)

At the time of the second interview, Sam has already been living in his own studio for two months. He does not feel well, i.e. he feels bored and that he is being treated as a number rather than a person. He feels stressed and unmotivated for his vocational training. Twice a week, professionals (it is unclear which profession) come by and talk with him. He finds this stressful and not at all helpful – first, because there are always different people visiting him and it is impossible for him to build up a trusting relationship as he has to repeat and explain things several times; and second, because often they do not speak Luxembourgish (or German) but only French, a language that he does not really master. The conversations are full of misunderstandings, and he found them increasingly wearing and experiences devaluation in these conversations. With regard to the misunderstandings that occurred, he feels patronised and wrongfully treated.

Further, his relationship with his person of trust in the residential care setting has grown weaker, and he yearns for a constant and strong relationship with such a person:

> Sam: Pff, yes, that a person to whom I can entrust step by step everything, because if every time another person drops in, then s/he does not know what has happened two weeks ago or so, but others know it already and then, then in principle I repeat always every two days the same, let's say it like this. (Interview at t2; translation by the authors)

The loss of a stable and trusting relationship (Bakketeig & Backe-Hansen, 2018; Gundersen, 2021) with a professional is not only a further blow in his life but a crucial factor in the difficulties he faces after leaving the residential care setting and in coping with other challenging constellations, i.e. at school and in surviving with regard to basic needs (see below).

He has contact with a psychiatrist who does not work therapeutically with him but writes a report for him so that he has permission to live in the assisted living studio financed partly by the government. He still takes part in the same activities to help him master stressful situations, such as practising artistic activities and teaching them to a friend.

On the one hand, he explains that he tries to leave the period in the institutional care setting behind as this phase of life reminds him of his difficult life story thus far. On the other hand, looking back, he describes his last year in residential care as a period without sorrow. He now has to master everything on his own, without feeling prepared for how to deal with official

letters and financial obligations, while at the same time studying for school. While young people moving out of their parents' house can ask them for support to help solve administrative problems, this is often not possible for those leaving care, and they have to master different challenges at the same time in a densified way (Stein, 2014). At the same time, Sam's situation shows that "readiness to leave care" (Benbenishty & Schiff, 2009) is not something that is achieved at a certain point in time through preparation, but rather a longer process – sometimes spanning years – is needed to feel ready to master one's life, even after intensive preparation in the institutional care setting.

The relationship with his father seems to have improved. He still has his best friend and a friend in the residential care setting with whom he stays in contact. While he finds personal relationships supportive, he seems to be increasingly disconnected from professional social and therapeutic services.

His plans for the future include doing a vocational course/apprenticeship abroad and living abroad.

Loss of existential support, losing voice and trust in the care system despite increasing social services (t3)

Another eight months later (t3), Sam describes his situation as being worse, saying that he has fallen into a deep hole, suffers from sleeping difficulties and fear, and describes his situation as ups and downs with regard to depressive feelings. Further, he describes his situation as feeling isolated and says he has nothing to do besides writing applications. Eventually, Sam dropped out of school due to problems related to discrimination against him by his teacher, which could not be solved.

This discrimination by the teacher was linked with the diagnosis by the psychiatrist he needed in order not to lose his accommodation, showing how powerful and far-reaching a diagnosis could be. Even after making several complaints against the discriminating categorisation together with his father, nobody helped him. Therefore, he has left school, which leads to difficulties in paying his rent and for food because financial support is only provided when he is in school or working. This shows how different relations in this constellation are interdependent and influence each other.

Sam tries to find work. He has not paid the rent on the flat for several months and receives some money from his father and grandfather, but this is not sufficient to survive, and so he has started selling his personal belongings, such as objects needed to pursue his hobbies and electronic devices. Although the number of professionals involved in the constellation have increased, Sam does not receive the help he needs to return to a situation in which he could experience self-efficacy or scopes of action, or develop a way out.

As, in Luxembourg, people under the age of 25 do not receive the guaranteed minimum income (RMG/RIS) if they do not have special needs, once again he needs several reports from the psychiatrist to apply for the therapeutically indicated guaranteed minimum income. Although he has applied for it, he is still waiting for the money. Due to his debts, he goes to a social worker, who has promised that he will receive the minimum income soon, but Sam does not believe him anymore. The social worker contacted his father behind his back, which has aggravated the situation for Sam. Sam's scopes of action and the way he is trying to solve his existential problems have thus been undermined by the social worker. Furthermore, he

says that he has asked the professional who is responsible for the accompanied living for therapy but was told that this was not possible as he would lose his right to live in the studio and that he already has a psychologist involved. For him, the psychologist is not the same as a psychotherapist, and he does not feel understood:

> I: What does the psychologist do?
>
> Sam: Yeah, don't know, not much: "Try to live less stressful and keep calm". I also said: "Try to live six months without money, then we talk again". Because they have grumbled about me, if I sold more things, they would kick me out. [omission] And I told him: "Yes (sighs) what shall I eat then if I do not sell anything?" (Interview at t3; translation by the authors)

Although Sam experiences self-efficacy and agency in relation to his creative leisure activities, he sells what he needs to practise them in order to survive, along with his digital devices. Even in this situation, he does not experience understanding in his relationships with the professionals, and his creative approach to coping with his difficult situation is not given credence.

Sam describes his attitude towards life as trying to make the best out of the situation, that he goes out for a walk or for a drink and that he sees it as a transitional phase of life. Once he has a job, he will get his personal belongings back. He still meets his best friend and his family, and also the friend from the residential care setting. Although he still occasionally visits the latter, he has no supportive relationship with the professionals anymore, although they had told him before moving out that he could contact them if needed. He describes the situation as follows:

> I: What do you do when you are in the former residential care setting (.) when you go there?
>
> Sam: Well, I sometimes go there because of my friend. (omission) Don't know they/they do not talk much with me. They just ask: "How are you?", I say: "Good". And then, yes. Somehow as if I had never ever lived there. It feels like just being a fellow of my friend, like that, don't know. (Interview at t3; translation by the authors)

He explains that he would have needed to remain in contact with his reference social pedagogue for another two to three months after moving out. Despite a multitude of contacts with professionals, Sam perceives his voice as increasingly silenced since he has left the residential care setting as he does not feel heard or understood, and not speaking a common language aggravates this situation (see first interview). Carol Gilligan (1982) described how young women lose their voice to somehow maintain relationships and how this is mirrored in interviews. Similarly to Gilligan's findings, in the third interview with Sam, he uses "I don't know" around 48 times and starts the interview using the phrase "I don't know" three times. He also makes more and longer pauses within the interview. Although he is well aware of what he needs, and although he can describe his feelings well, this shows that he has difficulties explaining his complicated situation to the researcher and that he is not really expecting to be understood anymore or to receive support within relationships with professionals, including the interviewer. "Not being heard" is also an experience that he had with regard to his teacher's stigmatising, as the filed complaints to the responsible institution were not answered. Selling the personal belongings he needed to pursue his hobbies is also an example of losing more and more opportunities to express himself towards others.

As regards the future, he recognises that a vocational training/apprenticeship abroad will not be possible. His hope for the future is that he has work and a regular working day, finished paying his depths and can go and stay abroad.

But the issue is not only that Sam is not listened to, heard and understood by the different professionals, with the consequence that his needs are not being met, but there also seems to be no cooperation between the different systems and social services with regard to Sam's needs, and a relationship between the professional services is lacking. Sam therefore does not receive psychotherapeutic help, despite the fact that he feels increasingly depressed against the backdrop of shrinking scopes of action. The different professionals and social services do not interact with each other; nor do they seem to be coordinated by a case manager. There is no clear plan or vision or even responsibility in the system that could help Sam to find a way out of his stressful situation. The scopes of action of the professionals seem to be very limited and restricted due to institutional boundaries, and so they do not open up opportunities for Sam to receive flexible support adapted to his situation (Bakketeig & Backe-Hansen, 2018). Furthermore, they get in touch with Sam's father without consulting or asking Sam for permission, which undermines his voice even more. There is also no ombudsperson who supervises the process or stops it when it is moving in a difficult direction – a person who could also be someone for Sam to turn to.

Over the period of the three interviews, agency within the constellations and relations relevant for Sam became more and more limited. To meet his basic needs, Sam orientates towards existential survival. Nevertheless, one way of still achieving agency is by projecting himself into the further future a couple of years away from the present and by imagining his possible life then. The agency of the professionals is also limited as they do not question or transgress their institutional boundaries to get in contact with each other, and to find solutions to move on together with Sam, taking his strengths, resources and ways of coping into consideration.

7 Discussion: Interdependency, relational professionalism and boundary work – fostering the achievement of agency in constellations of leaving care

In line with existing research, the analysis shows that Sam expresses a clear need for a stable, continuous and trustful relationship with a professional who supports him in solving the arising difficulties and who understands his needs as the whole constellation changes when leaving the care setting (Bakketeig & Backe-Hansen, 2018; Gundersen, 2021; Karl, 2025). This could be with a professional from the former residential care setting, or at least, a new stable relationship with a professional should be made possible.

Furthermore, an ombudsperson (Equit et al., 2017) who could be addressed when a process or constellation is blocked, or a young person does not receive the support needed to move on, would be helpful. The new legal project aimed at the help, support and protection of minors and young adults and families ("Avant projet de Loi portant aide, soutien et protection aux mineurs, aux jeunes et aux familles") foresees procedures established for minors to file a complaint in institutions, and also indicates that they must be informed about these procedures – a fact that points in the right direction, although it does not specifically mention young adults in transition out of residential care.

The analytical perspective on relational agency sheds light on the existential interdependency of people (Antle et al., 2009; Atkinson & Hyde, 2019; Karl, 2025; Propp et al. 2003), but also on the interdependencies of relationships in constellations. Although Köngeter (2009, 2013) focuses on the relationships between parents and social workers in the care system as a

starting point, his insights into an understanding of interdependent social relationships that build up a network are also relevant for the professional relationship with young people leaving care. It is also evident in Sam's situation that there is not only the question of whether there is a trusting relationship, but also how the different relationships, professional and personal (e.g. with the father), are interconnected and influence each other. His relationship with material things (selling his personal belongings) also influences the relationships with the professionals. A relational stance or mode of professionalism sees the professionals as part of a social network of social relations and goes beyond a dyadic, clinical perspective by analysing the whole constellation with regard to different personal and institutionalised professional relationships (Köngeter, 2013, 194), and by reflecting how an intervention either fosters or does not foster scopes of action and agency within the constellation.

Such an understanding of relational professionalism would include listening to the young person and their understanding of the situation to develop, in a participative process, a supportive and enabling constellation with the aim of achieving broader scopes of action. Bitzan et al. (2006) underline the importance of the biographical experiences of the addressees as a counterpoint to the power imbalances between institutions and addressees that are hidden behind fixed ideas of what the aim and the dysfunctionalities of the institutional inertia are in the face of fluid and complex situations for the addressees. They postulate a professional–institutional self-critical attitude based on the voices of the addressees.[5]

A relational stance would also be aware of the institutional and organisational boundaries that lead to different yet unconnected "pillars" of social services. In the interviews with Sam, it becomes evident that there is no translation between the different institutional contexts, and that his needs are not seen in their complexity and wholeness but only treated in a fragmented way. This fragmentation is connected with different (negative) social constructions of him as an addressee (Bitzan & Bolay, 2017) that matter for further financial but also psychotherapist support.

Connected with this, a relational, analytical stance would also include recognising that power is part of the interconnected relations, and that social workers are involved in these power relations. The aim would then be a critical questioning of the powerful boundaries constructed by the different social services and thus social work itself (Kessl & Maurer, 2009), and the respective specific categorisations of a young person (such as a person with a specific psychiatric diagnosis, a person with debts, etc.). Boundary work (Kessl & Maurer, 2012) would include here listening to the addressees to understand the institutional boundaries they face day by day, and at the same time working on the transformation and critical deconstruction of these institutional and professional boundaries with the aim of liberation and broader scopes of action, both for the addressees and the social workers, and on a societal level. Such work on boundaries would include a critical stance towards the powerful positioning in relational constellations as social workers and researchers. This would include engaging in policy (Gal & Weiss-Gal, 2023) to transform the support system to make it relevant for care leavers "with the intention of liberation" (Kessl & Maurer, 2012, p. 2).

[5] In using the term "addressee", we refer to the German discourse, in which this term is used to show that social services address specific needs (and not others), and that "addressees" are constructed by powerful discourses and society, institutions/organisations and in interactions with professionals (Bitzan & Bolay, 2017), and that addressees are not only clients but whole individuals with needs and their own will, and people who are able to resist or oppose.

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