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The interplay between turning points and agency among young people with out-of-home care experience. A relational-narrative approach

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Abstract: The concept of turning points has become central in research on young people with out-of-home care experience. Within these debates, agency plays a crucial role, particularly in understanding the conditions that enable positive change. However, previous research has often conceptualised agency primarily as an individual capacity, risking reproducing assumptions about autonomy and self-sufficiency that overlook relational interdependencies. Such framings implicitly reinforce dichotomies between what is considered normal and what is not, while obscuring the mutual influence between individuals and their social environments.

For this purpose, the paper draws on a secondary analysis of empirical data from a dissertation project in Austria, which investigated the significance of agency in the process of transitioning out of care. By linking turning points and agency, this paper contributes to a deeper understanding of biographical change as a socially embedded and narratively mediated process.

The findings have implications for research, social pedagogy, and policy, underscoring the importance of spaces that allow young people to shape and sustain positive self-narratives beyond care.

Keywords: Out-of-Home Care; Agency; Turning Points; Care Leavers

1 Introduction

The concept of turning points has become central in research about young people with out-of-home care experience. Although, as Roberts and colleagues (2022) note, the empirical base remains limited, the concept has gained increasing theoretical relevance for understanding biographical change and development.

Two perspectives have been particularly influential in this debate: the life-course perspective and the biographical-narrative perspective. While international studies, as outlined by Reimer (2014), indicate that these discourses often converge methodologically, a clearer distinction is drawn in German-speaking research. The life course perspective tends to be associated with quantitative research methods and focuses on objective changes in the life course of groups of people. Biographical research takes a qualitative approach, examining subjective narratives and individual experiences of life stories. The former considers turning points, according to Elder (1999), as objective changes in an expected course of events and thus can only limitedly address the subjective handling of these changes. The latter, on the other hand, has the advantage of examining a variety of turning points from the subjects' perspectives, which enables a reinterpretation of the past, present, and future and linking them to societal frameworks (Reimer, 2014).

Different aspects of turning points are discussed along these theoretical perspectives. They may be initiated by seemingly insignificant events or occur in conjunction with external, visible events (Gilligan, 2009). Moreover, turning points can relate to both singular episodes and cumulative events (Höjer & Sjöblom, 2014). In this context, Refaeli and Strahl (2014) offer an important refinement: they conceptualise turning points not as isolated events but as turning point processes, describing them as subjective biographical learning processes through which individuals gradually reinterpret their biographical experiences.

Most studies tend to present turning points as moments of positive change, acknowledging that negative experiences can also lead to positive turns. However, turning points are not consistently described as positive events. Höjer and Sjöblom (2014) describe them as "crucial events in life which give a structure of 'before' and 'after'" (p. 3), noting that such moments can equally result in distressing experiences, for example, through poorly planned or forced transitions from care.

Other authors examine the narrative function of turning points in the life stories of young people with out-of-home care experience. Evans (2018), for example, analyses personal accounts, that can be found on charity websites. Turning points play a crucial role in these narratives, serving as a structural feature within the self-description of care leavers. These narratives also emphasise the positive influence and engagement of significant others, describing interventions that transform a negative past and an expected negative future into a positive course of events. While such accounts highlight the self-perception of care leavers as survivors of the system, Evans (2018) warns against reducing the identity of care leavers to this simplistic view.

Within these debates on turning points, agency plays a crucial role, particularly for understanding the conditions that enable positive change (e.g., Gilligan, 2009; Johnson & Mendes, 2014; Roberts et al., 2022). However, agency is most often conceptualised as individual agency: the capacity of an autonomous subject to act and make decisions within structural constraints. Eßer and Schröder (2020, p. 300) argue that this understanding has the disadvantage of being tied to notions of an autonomous, self-sufficient individual who achieves independence by overcoming vulnerability. Such framing implicitly reproduces dichotomies between what is considered normal and what is not, and tends to obscure the interdependence of individuals and their social environments (Peters et al., 2018, pp. 8-10).

Relational approaches, by contrast, challenge this dichotomy. They do not assume autonomy in the classical sense but instead highlight the interconnectedness of individuals and their social contexts. As Eßer and Schröder (2020, p. 300) point out, it is instead a matter of reflecting on embeddedness in social relations and contexts, from which agency and vulnerability equally emerge. From this perspective, agency and vulnerability are not opposing concepts but mutually constitutive dimensions.

Against this background, it seems both necessary and fruitful to rethink the interplay between turning points and agency as a relational and socially embedded dynamic. Such a perspective can broaden the theoretical and empirical understanding of the process of leaving care and contribute to current efforts to further develop theoretical frameworks in this field (van Breda & Reuben, 2025).

This paper, therefore, examines the interplay between turning points and agency, drawing on my dissertation project, which examined the significance of agency in the process of leaving

care in Austria (Streissguertl, 2023). While turning points were not the primary focus of the study, an interaction between crucial biographical moments and narratives of agency can be recognised. This connection which will now be explored in more detail through a secondary analysis of the empirical data.

Firstly, this paper will begin by reviewing existing literature on the role of agency in turning points among young people with out-of-home care experience. This will be followed by a discussion of the conceptualisation of agency as developed within the framework of my dissertation project. After outlining the methodology, the interplay between turning points and agency is examined through a case study. The analysis is then discussed in relation to existing research. This paper concludes with key takeaways for practice, research, and social policy, highlighting the broader implications of a relational-narrative understanding of agency.

2 Turning points and agency

For Gilligan (2009), the concept of turning points is crucial for understanding *positive* change. In a seminal work, he understands it as a "catalyst for an enduring positive shift in the trajectory of development of the individual" (p. 17), emphasising that "good outcomes may come from bad as well as good experiences" (p. 19). Change can be initiated by events at multiple levels. This includes macro external population level events such as wars or natural disasters; normative events such as marriage or parenthood; as well as local or non-normative events such as sudden unemployment or illness. Additionally, it can also arise from micro-level events, seemingly insignificant moments that unexpectedly occur in a person's everyday life and only gain positive significance in the person's narrative in retrospect. He emphasises that external circumstances should be understood as opportunities that do not determine developments or changes. Instead, it is important how individuals respond to them.

Overall, Gilligan (2009) concludes that enduring positive change depends on the interplay of four key conditions: opportunity, readiness, agency, and a sustaining context. In addition to opportunity, it also requires the realisation that "a certain incident resonates at a particular point for a particular person because it carries live personal meaning for this person at this point" (p. 28). This awareness, in turn, requires "some degree of agency on the part of the relevant actor" (p. 17), enabling the individual to proactively engage with the opportunity – to take risks. In short: "They need to have the right mental attitude at that point" (p. 29).

In this context, agency is understood as individual agency, which refers to the capability of a human actor to act as an agent within the structural framework. Furthermore, agency is presumed to be the driving force behind initiating positive change. For lasting change, there need to be good reasons to stick with it, such as in the form of an emotional return on investment. Gilligan (2009) writes about a new identity that requires positive reinforcement to establish itself in the long term. This can be particularly supported by key others in the person's everyday life.

Building on this, Brady and Gilligan (2018) examine pathways to higher education among care leavers from a life-course perspective. This approach highlights the interaction between individual agency and structural conditions in shaping educational trajectories. Agency refers to the active role individuals play in making choices and taking action within the opportunities and constraints of their social contexts. Therefore, they propose their understanding of a life-course perspective to be influenced by both sides, by individual agency as well as by "current (and past) structural constraints and contexts" (Brady & Gilligan, 2018, p. 75).

Refaeli and Strahl (2014) also examine the question of how young people with out-of-home care experience take successful paths to higher education and which factors enable this. They also refer to Gilligan's (2009) concept and investigate – from the perspective of biographical research – "the subjective meaning of a Turning Point for the person himself" (Refaeli & Strahl, 2014, p. 4). Turning points are understood as an internal transformation process, as a turning point process. The focus is particularly on the person's ability to recognise an opportunity for change and subsequently make use of it. Refaeli and Strahl (2014) underline the importance of readiness, which they describe as "not so much a condition but an emerging process" (p. 9). This enables an internal transformation where a shift from a passive to an actively shaping role occurs. Agency is thus part of an internal biographical learning process, closely intertwined with a person's readiness. However, the authors emphasise that this process requires being embedded in a supportive framework. This comprises two dimensions: change is accompanied and prepared by the support of significant others, "and the main event (or opportunity) happens as a result of the participation of other persons and their involvement" (p. 9).

In order to adequately capture the diversity of meanings of the turning point concept, Reimer (2014) aims to merge the previously encountered objective dimensions of a life-course perspective and the subjective dimensions of biographical research. While the former focuses on observable life events, the latter emphasises subjective experiences such as regaining a positive self-image or a sense of self-efficacy. Therefore, Reimer (2014) proposes to consider the concept on multiple levels and subsequently refers to turning points "when (and only when) there is a change of direction within both the objective and the subjective dimension" (p. 8). Agency is negotiated among the subjective criteria as "gaining or regaining agency" (p.8). Thus, the subjective side of individual agency is examined, which focuses on biographical self-descriptions.

Johnson and Mendes (2014) extend this view in their study on the housing situation of young people with out-of-home care experience. They describe agency as a positive, future-oriented force driven by the desire for a better life but dependent on suitable structural conditions such as aftercare support, positive professional relationships, or structural assistance with income and housing (p. 5). Similarly, Roberts and colleagues (2022) show that turning points and agency are interdependent processes shaped by both individual initiative and contextual opportunities.

Across these studies, agency is consistently conceptualised as individual agency or as an individual's capacity, which is considered the driving force for initiating positive change. For long-term change, however, there need to be good reasons to stick with it, such as in the form of an emotional return on investment (Gilligan, 2009). The necessary positive reinforcement is particularly provided by key individuals and appropriate resources (Gilligan, 2009; Johnson & Mendes, 2014; Roberts et al., 2022). Structural conditions and individual agency thus depend on each other and are closely linked.

This way of understanding agency is compatible with concepts such as *bounded agency* (Evans, 2007), which effectively bridges the dichotomy between structure and agency. Here, individual agency is consistently described in a social context, where both individual and structural factors play a role. It is a

> "socially situated agency, influenced but not determined by environments and emphasizing internalized frames of reference as well as external actions. By examining

> bounded agency, the focus moves from structured individualization onto individuals as actors, without losing the perspective of structuration" (Evans, 2007, pp. 92-93).

Relational approaches to agency offer another perspective by detaching agency from the individual and locating it in the relations within the social context.

3 Agency: a relational narrative approach

In leaving care research, the concept of agency frequently serves as a theoretical framework for analysing how young people navigate transitions (van Breda & Reuben, 2025). Recent studies increasingly adopt relational approaches, emphasising that agency develops within social and institutional contexts (e.g., Gundersen, 2021; Göbel et al., 2021). Yet what does 'relational' actually mean when applied to agency? To address this question, it is useful to revisit the conceptual foundations of the term.

Helfferich (2012) points out that agency is a vague and confusing concept, used differently across disciplines such as sociology and psychology. However, a common core can be identified: agency is fundamental to frameworks that ask who or what has agency, to whom agency is attributed, and whose influence is taken to produce specific effects (p. 12). The crucial distinction between understanding and definition rests on the difference between empirically reconstructed and theoretically derived perspectives.

Helfferich (2012), adopts a relational-constructivist perspective, asserting that agency is ultimately rooted in subjective theories about the agency of individuals, objects, or anonymous forces. Within the framework of qualitative-reconstructive research, the concept aims at the linguistic attributions of agency. Consequently, agency can take on a great variety of forms (p. 11). From this perspective, the individual is no longer the central focus. Rather it is about the arrangements of agentic forces and the attributed capacities for action. Research practice is based on subjective data; however, agency is not necessarily an attribute of the individual, but it emerges from the relations of the social and life-world relations. In this context, self-attributions of agency are naturally essential. This illustrates the interplay between the social determination of subjective agency constructs and the subjective potential to create reality. In other words, subjective interpretations are embedded in collective interpretations (p. 15).

Relationality, whether empirically reconstructed or theoretically derived, indicates a *non-essentialist* standpoint, i.e., a rejection of the concept that agency is a persistent quality of the individual. Emirbayer and Mische (1998), for instance, focus on the temporal dimension of agency. The biography of the individual appears to be a carrier of routinised actions, which can be reinterpreted against the backdrop of an imagined future. By shifting between these temporal orientations, actors can also influence structural conditions. The authors emphasise an internal relational perspective, in which agency is always directed toward and in relation to something. From an external relational perspective, agency manifests as interaction with contextual conditions in the flow of time. Emirbayer and Mische (1998) therefore speak of a double constitution of agency and structure, where temporal-relational context conditions shape the possibilities of individual frameworks of orientation.

Building on this perspective, Biesta and Tedder (2006) argue that agency should not be understood as an individual capacity but as a transactional quality that arises through the engagement of actors with their social and temporal environments (p. 18). In this view, the distinction between actor and context is analytical rather than ontological; both are mutually

affected in the process of action. Agency is thus not something a person possesses but something that is achieved through interaction within particular relational situations (p. 18).

From this standpoint, relationality is fundamental, dissolving the binary opposition between individual action and social structure. Burkitt (2016) further develops this idea by highlighting the interdependencies within ongoing social relations. He argues that agency is not a separate power merely enabled or constrained by relationships but is constituted within them, emerging and evolving as relationships unfold across time and space (p. 336).

The relational framework subsequently also determines the reflexive capacity of individuals. According to Burkitt (2016), reflexivity is itself part of this relational framework, since reflexivity

> "is relational not only because it involves individuals thinking about their relationships to others or to a social context: it is relational because relationships are at the heart of reflexivity and shape its dialogical form" (p. 335).

Relational agency thus does not exclude reflexivity and creative obstinacy; rather, it emphasises that these moments remain within the relational framework. Experienced agency is ultimately a matter of degree (Burkitt, 2016).

This gradability of agency is thoroughly discussed by Scherr (2012). He initially examines whether embedding creative obstinacy within a relational framework inadvertently reifies a socially deterministic perspective. Furthermore, in such a framework, the dynamics of interactions and relational structures can become the primary determinants of individual agency. This issue is resolved by the premise of a paradoxical basic constellation, which, drawing on system-theoretical arguments, is defined as the mutual dependence and independence of social and psychological processes (p. 108). This paradox is best understood through the lens of the temporal perspective, as discussed by Emirbayer and Mische (1998). Accordingly, he speaks of agency when and to the extent that the biographical processes leading to the formation of individual or collective dispositions, and the current situational conditions, do not unalterably determine what happens next (Scherr, 2012, p. 109).

The seeming distinction between social coercion and individual freedom can be resolved if agency is understood as a *graduated quality*, the question then becomes what degree of obstinate agency characterises the respective social constellations (Scherr, 2012, p. 113). Creative reflexive capacity is thus not determined by interactions within the relational framework but rather by the paradoxical moment where both outcome and starting point of subjectively experienced possibilities converge.

Building on the preceding discussion and against the background of the broader debate on individual agency and certain relational perspectives that either overemphasise the autonomous individual or, conversely, reduce agency to something ephemeral, a middle position seems useful. This perspective conceives agency as a configuration of paradoxical simultaneities: detached from and situated within the individual; neither a stable personal attribute nor merely transitory.

From this standpoint, two complementary perspectives can be distinguished. Firstly, from an external perspective, agency appears as an empirical effect (Raithelhuber & Schröer, 2018) – a contingent process evoked by the relations within the social framework. Secondly, from an

internal perspective, agency is experienced as a subjective striving for agency (Böhnisch, 2012; Keupp, 2008). Agency then becomes visible in narrative attributions of agency, which can take on a wide variety of forms (Helfferich, 2012). The reflexive moment of agency – the breaking point in an otherwise continuous determinism – is therefore not located before all sociality but grounded in the primacy of relational contexts (Burkitt, 2016). The crucial point here is that agency not only becomes visible in these narratives but is also generated along the attributions of agency. These narrative attributions, in turn, become part of the relational framework, illustrating that agency is a graduated quality (Scherr, 2012).

Building on these paradoxical simultaneities, I conceptualise the dynamic interplay between the external and internal dimensions as *relational-narrative agency* – an understanding of agency situated both in social relations and in the individual.

The internal dimension of agency, in turn, cannot be separated from the concepts of subjectivity and identity; they are two sides of the same coin (Bitzan & Bolay, 2017). The subject is understood here in relational terms. As Scherr (2008) argues, subjectivity constitutes a definable and gradable potential encompassing human experience, thought, and action (pp. 139-140). In this sense, one can speak of *dialogical subjectivity* (Zima, 2010), in which the subject is conceived as a dynamic-dialogical instance capable of radical change and of initiating an entirely new narrative programme (Zima, 2010, p. 368). Identity, as the emergence of the subjective, refers to the subject's pursuit of a meaningful narrative (Zima, 2010), which inherently includes the striving for subjectively experienced agency. Identity also emerges as an act of narration, i.e., as identity work (Lucius-Hoene, 2010; Keupp, 2008). Through this narrative process, attributions of agency are continuously constructed and negotiated.

By grounding agency in a relational understanding of subjectivity and identity, agency can be conceived not as an ephemeral or enduring quality, but as a fluid, evolving phenomenon.

Additionally, by situating the concept within and through relational embeddedness, this approach also makes room for non-narrative modes of identity. It therefore does not refer exclusively to a narrative constituted self, but to one that is generated within relationships and multiple interdependencies. Narrative and non-narrative forms are not opposites but interwoven dimensions of self-experience. This self can become tangible in diverse forms of expression, such as embodied or pre-reflective experience (Hünersdorf, 2018). In this way, agency is also generated where narrative coherence breaks down or where verbal articulation is limited. In short, 'narrative' refers to the temporal and meaningful structuring of experience, while 'relational' denotes the embedding of experience in enduring interdependencies, including non-narrative forms of self- and world-relation. Both unfold in a paradoxical simultaneity: agency is narrated and embodied at once.

Furthermore, from this perspective, agency and vulnerability are not opposing concepts but mutually constitutive dimensions. As Eßer and Schröder (2020, p. 293) emphasise, agency emerges through social relationships that also generate vulnerability. Thus, both are inseparable within the relational fabric of lived experience, where vulnerability and agency, dependence and independence unfold simultaneously.

4 Research method

This article examines the interplay between turning points and agency in the narratives of young people with out-of-home care experience. While previous research has often

conceptualised agency as an individual capacity, this view risks reproducing assumptions about autonomy and self-sufficiency that overlook the relational interdependencies in which young people's actions and decisions are embedded.

Building on this critique, this paper aims to connect the concept of turning points with an understanding of agency situated both in social relations and in the individual. Based on empirical data from my dissertation project, this paper focuses on how turning points are narratively constructed as moments in which agency is redefined and negotiated.

4.1 Strategy of Data Collection

This article presents a secondary case study from my dissertation project, which investigated the impact of socially prefigured notions of normality on the development of independent living among young people with out-of-home care experience in Austria. The dissertation focused on ideal-typical constructions of independence and the ways in which agency was narratively negotiated in the process of leaving care.

While the original study explored various forms of agency, the concept of turning points was not part of the initial analytical framework. The present article therefore offers a secondary, theory-driven analysis of one particularly informative interview case. The decision to analyse a single interview aimed at achieving an in-depth grasp of how narrative mechanisms construct agency and change. A single, information-rich case allows for a detailed exploration of linguistic, semantic, and biographical nuances that might remain obscured in broader comparative analyses. Since not all interviews in the original corpus contained identifiable turning points, the case was selected because it offers a particularly coherent and reflective narrative of change and reorientation.

The case is drawn from a corpus of eighteen narrative interviews conducted between 2017 and 2020 with young adults (8 women, 10 men, aged 19–35 years, M = 23.3) who had lived in residential out-of-home care (e.g., group homes, supported living arrangements) and had moved out at least one year before the interview. Participants were recruited through care organisations and snowball sampling.

4.2 Strategy of Data Analysis

The data were collected through narrative interviews (Rosenthal, 2015), a method that enables participants to construct and articulate their experiences through self-initiated storytelling. This approach allows subjective meanings and temporal structures to emerge from the participants' own perspectives, rather than imposing predefined analytic categories.

All interviews were fully transcribed, and the data analysis was carried out computer-assisted using MAXQDA. The analysis followed the procedures of reflexive grounded theory (Breuer et al., 2009), which extends the classic grounded theory approach by explicitly including the researcher's reflexivity as part of the analytic process. This means that theoretical sensitivity, positionality, and interpretive decisions were continuously documented in memos and analytic notes.

However, solely following the coding process of grounded theory methodology proved insufficient for examining narrative constructions of agency. Therefore, an additional analysis method was sought, which could be triangulated with the coding process to create a more meaningful procedure. For this purpose, elements of narrative agency analysis were employed (Lucius-Hoene & Deppermann, 2004; Helfferich, 2020). The principles of grounded theory

methodology remained primarily guiding, while the implications of agency analysis were continually reflected as a pre-concept.

Agency analysis can subsequently take place on three levels: at the level of the narrative and its linguistic features, at the level of interactive production and the roles involved, and at the level of story version and morality, which helps interpret the agency features against a biographical background (Lucius-Hoene, 2012, p. 41). This approach is based on the premise of the assumption of meaningfulness (Helfferich, 2020). It suggests that all details of linguistic expressions of agency are not randomly produced and require attention (Helfferich, 2020, p. 54). Therefore, analysis must be detailed, focusing particularly on predicate expressions and semantic roles.

To extend the analytic perspective, this secondary study integrates the concept of turning points as proposed by Wieslander and Löfgren (2023). Here, turning points are understood as a theoretically informed tool in narrative research. They refer to something "that takes shape in the story" (p. 4). Hence, their focus lies on the semantic level, exploring how a story is conveyed – such as "through use of language and multimodal signs" (p. 4). Turning points in narratives are understood in a way "that they mark an 'event' or a new direction" (p. 5). In doing so, they are more than just accompanying significant transitions in the narrators' lives, as these can be experienced very differently on an individual level.

4.3 Ethical Considerations

The research adhered to the ethical guidelines of the University of Klagenfurt. Participation was voluntary, and all interviews were conducted under confidential conditions. Data were anonymised and pseudonymised in all transcripts and publications. Participants provided informed consent for recording, transcription, and the use of anonymised data for research purposes. Particular attention was paid to the sensitivity of participants' biographical experiences and to creating a safe interview environment.

5 Findings

To illustrate the interplay between turning points and agency, the case study of **Tamara** will be discussed. At the time of the interview, Tamara was in her early twenties. She had left care upon turning 18, after spending nearly three years in a supported living arrangement. The interview took place in an office at her former youth care provider, a location Tamara was familiar with and had chosen herself. I was welcomed by her former caregiver, who organised the meeting. Overall, the atmosphere was characterised by a sense of warmth and hospitality; although Tamara was initially a bit reserved, she was happy to talk about her life.

She begins her narrative with a detailed description of her family situation prior to entering the care system, mentioning both her parents and her sisters. She quickly highlights a pivotal conflict that shaped subsequent events: "As a child, you think everything your parents do is right" (Tamara, line 32)[1]. However, this sense of "rightness" increasingly felt wrong to Tamara, culminating in the realisation: "It's really a place that completely destroyed me somehow" (Tamara, lines 94-95)[2].

[1] „Als Kind empfindet man alles, was die Eltern machen, immer als richtig".

[2] „Also, es ist wirklich ein Ort, der mich komplett irgendwie zerstört hat"

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> "It felt like that, well, I felt like that, now that I look back, I felt like I was in one of those, [...] not a horror movie, but like a thriller where you don't know what's up and what's down, you don't know your way around, you don't know what's normal or what's not normal, you can no longer distinguish between right and wrong, and it's like a mental institution where you just don't know your way around at all. And it affected my psyche so much that [...] I really wouldn't know what would have happened to me if I'd been there any longer. So, it really is a place that has completely destroyed me somehow." (Tamara, lines 86-95)[3]

The experience of this "mental institution" relates to a rigid system of rules, arbitrary punishments, emotional coldness, and violence, particularly on the part of her father. She was unable to form an emotional bond with him. Her relationship with her mother was marked by intense ambivalence: "There was always so much emotion, then very little, and that made it hard for me to come to terms with it". At the time of the interview, Tamara had "ended" her relationship with both parents, i.e. actively broken off contact.

Tamara felt completely isolated within her family, a feeling of separation that intensified into the description of a dissociative state. The world is upside down in this "thriller where you don't know what's up and what's down". The only way out, seems to be an escape – a complete 'cut-off'. References to "what would have happened to me" and "that has completely destroyed me somehow" make the subsequent events seem inevitable.

These injustices eventually led to Tamara's proactive appearance as the agent of her actions: "And at some point in my youth, I stood up and said: 'I'm not going to take part in this anymore, it's madness!'" (Tamara, line 86)[4]. The realisation that the system was "madness" led to a break, and even her sisters showed no understanding.

Events then escalated rapidly. Tamara heard a vague "rumour" about her grandmother, which her father mentioned. This "rumour" consumes her, driving her to find out if it was true. It's described as an agentic force:

> "But it was still such a shock for me that I wanted to find out if it was true. So what is normal at all, who in my family is really just [unclear]? Somehow that was something new for me again, because I thought, I almost can't believe this, but it's kind of weird for me. Then I wanted to find out." (Tamara, lines 321-325)[5]

[3] „Man ist sich so vorgekommen, also, ich bin mir so vorgekommen, jetzt im Nachhinein, wenn ich mich so hineinfühle, ich war wie in so einem, […] keinen Horrorfilm, aber wie so einem Thriller, wo du nicht mehr weißt, wo oben und unten ist, man kennt sich nicht mehr aus, man weiß nicht mehr, was normal ist oder was nicht normal ist, man kann nicht mehr unterscheiden zwischen richtig und falsch, und das ist wie so eine Psychoanstalt, wo man sich einfach überhaupt nicht mehr auskennt. Und das ist so auf die Psyche gegangen, dass […] ich echt nicht wissen würde, wie es weitergegangen wäre mit mir, wenn ich echt dort noch länger gewesen wäre. Also, es ist wirklich ein Ort, der mich komplett irgendwie zerstört hat".

[4] „Und irgendwann im Jugendalter habe ich mich dann gestellt und gesagt: ‚Ich mache da nicht mehr mit, das ist ja alles Irrsinn!'"

[5] „Aber trotzdem war das für mich dann so ein Schock, dass ich dann herausfinden wollte, ob das stimmt. Also was ist überhaupt normal, wer in meiner Familie ist wirklich nur einfach [unv.]? Irgendwie war das wieder für mich so was Neues, weil ich gedacht habe, das kann ich fast nicht glauben, aber das ist irgendwie komisch für mich. Wollte das dann herausfinden".

Tamara anticipated her father's reaction, knowing he was unpredictable if he discovered she was spreading "the rumour". However, the urge to investigate the rumour, to understand "what is normal at all", allows her to perhaps bring about the decisive conflict. Her father eventually found out: "And then I heard it, and then I got scared. Because I knew my father couldn't control himself at all and I never knew what would happen". His unpredictability led her to run away from home and hide in the forest. This dense narrative passage that follows describes a sense of losing control over events: "And then it was like a movie" (Tamara, line 363)[6].

The sequence of events itself becomes an agentic force; it is no longer up to her to decide what happens. She had done her part, through intense self-reflection and rebellion against the family system. Now exhausted, the events became the agentic forces. Eventually, the police got involved, followed by the authorities.

Initially, Tamara does not perceive, the authorities, represented through the caregiver, as support. She only gradually began to understand the family system. Tamara describes herself as the only normal person emerging from a destructive system. And this should be recognised objectively, without her having to do anything: "It's just the truth" (Tamra, line 436)[7].

She wants the truth to speak for itself and confirm her normality, so she initially tells the caregiver little, accepting that the situation wouldn't change immediately: "It was kind of like that at the beginning, it really dragged on a bit, the time. Until it came to the point where the [authority] said: 'Something really isn't right here'" (Tamara, lines 423-425)[8]. The wait is worth it, as the truth eventually spoke for itself, and Tamara's understanding receives a validating confirmation. This is described as a turning point: "Until I realised that a lot of people believed me, that I didn't need to prove or show anything all the time, or understate anything, because it really is like that" (Tamara, lines 818-821)[9].

She particularly highlights the role of her caregiver, who understood and engaged with her empathetically: "And someone was there now and supported me and saw me, and as a result I no longer felt many things were so bad" (Tamara, lines 487-488)[10]. The turning point and the encounter with the professional led to a positive view of the subjective agency. This process occurred on at least two levels: self-acceptance (Tamara's redemptive answer to the existential question "Am I normal?") and understanding her own development. Tamara describes this understanding as *being seen*, making the dark, incomprehensible parts of her biography visible and understandable, the heaviness is defused and the perception of what is normal is then objectively confirmed. The result is a new identity (Gilligan 2009), linguistically connoted with an effective agency.

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[6] „Und dann war das wie so ein Film".

[7] „Es ist ja nur die Wahrheit".

[8] „War das irgendwie so, dass das am Anfang sich echt ein bisschen gezogen hat. Bis es dann dazu gekommen ist, dass [die Behörde] gesagt hat: 'Irgendwas stimmt hier wirklich nicht'".

[9] „Bis zu dem Zeitpunkt, wo ich gemerkt habe, es glauben mir sehr viele, ich brauche nicht immer irgendetwas zu beweisen oder zeigen, oder irgendetwas untertreiben, weil es ja wirklich so ist".

[10] „Und da war jetzt jemand da und hat mich unterstützt und mich gesehen, und dadurch habe ich oft viele Sachen gar nicht mehr als so schlimm empfunden".

Finally, custody is withdrawn from her parents, and she moves into a supported living arrangement. The day she moves out is also the last time she sees her parents and their house. This internal "ending" is now spatially enacted. Her sense of belonging completely shifts to the care system, particularly to the caregiver. What follows is described as a new life, a new identity accompanied by a positive self-image:

> "All in all, that actually made me who I am and made me really stand firm in life. And that I have the feeling that I won't necessarily be knocked over by anything. And that, in combination with the whole thing, was actually it." (Tamara, 803-806)[11]

The following events are described in a very abbreviated and condensed manner. In short, she completes an apprenticeship and moves into her first own apartment. However, the main part of the story essentially concludes with her departure from her parental home and her new sense of identity.

6 Discussion

What new perspectives arise from viewing agency as a relational and narrative construct? First, both the arrangement of the agentic forces within the relational context and the self-narrations of agency are equally considered. Agency is thus detached from the limitation to individual actions and decision-making (Elder, 1999) and expanded to encompass a broader range of relational and narrative dynamics. This perspective allows for a nuanced analysis, enabling multiple viewpoints to be considered. However, these primarily serve an analytical purpose. Both subjective experiences and actions, along with the agentic forces within the relational context, are part of an ongoing interdependence within various social relations (Burkitt, 2016).

Furthermore, the interplay with narratives that "mark an 'event' or a new direction" (Wieslander & Löfgren, 2023, p. 5) – understood as turning points – can be examined. In addition, the implications of objective events and the subjective experience of micro-level events can be focused on (Gilligan, 2009; Reimer, 2014). Yet based on the premise that individuals' biographies always contain both: emergence and structure (Alheit, 2010). Thus, biographical narratives always provide insights into both the individual and the universal.

How does the case study of Tamara illustrate this? Tamara describes the detachment from her family system as a turning point process (Refaeli & Strahl, 2014). Here, the narrated events are meaningfully focused on this process. This indicates that the act of narration itself, as in the choice she makes of which version of the story to tell, contains an aspect of agency. The narrative is presented as a prolonged internal process of detachment, with increasingly effective subjective agency. Moreover, the turning point somehow functions within the narrative as a marker for a sequence of positive events (Evans, 2018).

The internal realisation that the family situation cannot be normal leads to an internal rebellion and finally to a detachment from the family system. Throughout, the decisive impulses come from external sources. The "rumour" is described as the cause for "running away", and both are depicted as a processual chain of events that culminate in the opportunity (Gilligan, 2009) for the encounter with the caregiver. These events emerge as agentic forces.

[11] „Das insgesamt hat mich nachher eigentlich zu dem gemacht, was ich bin und zu dem, dass ich eigentlich wirklich fest im Leben stehe. Und dass ich das Gefühl habe, es wirft mich jetzt nicht unbedingt irgendwas um. Und das in Kombination mit dem Ganzen war eigentlich das".

Until that point, the subjectively experienced agency is tentative and only gains positive reinforcement through the experience of being seen by the professional. Thus, agency proves to be a graduated quality (Scherr, 2012) within the relational context.

This internal process of detachment also points to the processual nature of readiness (Refaeli & Strahl, 2014). This readiness is not simply given at the time of the turning point but develops over time, enabling the individual to recognise and seize the crucial opportunity. Furthermore, accepting the opportunity is dependent on "some degree of agency" (Gilligan, 2009, p. 17), but the narratives of agency change fundamentally in this process. In Tamara's case, this change in subjective agency is closely linked to a new identity (Gilligan, 2009), a positive self-experience that, however, relies on continuous positive reinforcement from a supportive social environment (Refaeli & Strahl, 2014). This significantly influences the stickability of the turning point (Gilligan, 2009) and the subsequent subjective agency.

Tamara's narrative also highlights the creative reflexive moment of agency. In her narrations, agency is not only visible as a result of the relational context but is also generated along the attributions of agency (Helfferich, 2012). This shows a complex relational entanglement, evident, for example, in her handling of the agentic force of "truth". Tamara recognises the "truth" through an agentive biographical process of understanding, but she waits for it to speak for itself and for the professional to recognise it as well. In this state of "waiting", an increasingly effective agency is already apparent, which, as part of the relational context, only gains confirmation and reinforcement through being seen.

7 Conclusion and and Key Takeaways

This paper explored the interplay between turning points and agency among young people with out-of-home care experience, applying a relational-narrative perspective on agency. By analysing one detailed case, this article shows that agency is not possessed by individuals but performed and negotiated within relational interdependencies. Based on the findings, several key takeaways for policy, practice, and research can be considered.

These findings are particularly relevant for shaping professional relationships (Gahleitner, 2017). They highlight the importance of spaces that allow young people to be seen and acknowledged, spaces that can become focal points for positive biographical self-formation. In Tamara's case, the caregiver's accepting and empathetic attention confirms her perception of what is considered normal. The professional's empathetic recognition provided precisely the necessary validation, enabling her to transform her biographical narrative. The result is a positive self-image and a new identity as an active, self-shaping person who goes on to successfully complete an apprenticeship.

From a social-pedagogical perspective, this suggests that professionals should not only prepare young people to appear 'independent' but should also focus on establishing reliable spaces where they can test, rework, and stabilise emerging self-narratives. Professional practice thus participates in the co-production of turning points and contributes to the ongoing negotiation of agency within biographical processes. However, further research is needed to expand knowledge for social pedagogical practice and to facilitate positive biographical processes.

The relational-narrative perspective is theoretically compatible with current debates in leaving care research, particularly with approaches that conceptualise agency as bounded or context-

dependent (Evans, 2007; Brady & Gilligan, 2018). Yet it goes a step further by shifting the analytical focus from individual action to relational and narrative processes.

Empirically, this perspective proves fruitful because it allows the reconstruction of how agency is narrated, negotiated, and validated in biographical accounts. It captures the interplay between social structures, interpersonal relationships, and subjective meaning-making more precisely than approaches that focus solely on outcome-oriented indicators of agency. In this sense, the concept of relational-narrative agency offers both a theoretical refinement and a methodological bridge between life-course and biographical-narrative perspectives in leaving care research.

The relational-narrative understanding of agency also carries important implications for social policy. Current policy frameworks often focus on preparing young people for individual autonomy and self-reliance, assuming a linear transition into independence. From a relational perspective, however, autonomy is not the endpoint but a part of an ongoing process of relational embeddedness.

Policies should therefore recognise the importance of continuity of relationships, for example, with professionals, peers, or supportive networks. Support structures that provide stable relationships, flexible access to aftercare support, and opportunities for biographical reflection can help young people to consolidate positive self-narratives beyond care.

8 Limitation

The paper is based on empirical data, with no primary focus on turning points. Consequently, the analytical framework was not based on data examining biographical turning points in detail. Therefore, participants could not directly and deliberately convey what they personally experienced as turning points. Yet, Roberts and colleagues (2022) note, that directly asking about turning points might unintentionally suggest to participants that they should have experienced them.

Additionally, due to the small sample size, it cannot be assumed that turning points are a common experience among individuals with out-of-home care experience. Further these processes can also be explained by alternative theoretical concepts.

Moreover, the case study describes a positive turning point, representing the overall positive narratives of turning points within the sample. With a larger number of participants and an alternative recruitment strategy – that does not rely on the respective institutions or organisations – a more differentiated picture might emerge. It should be emphasised, however, that this approach did not solely identify individuals who had taken a successful path but also established contacts with young people who had a special relationship of trust with the institution or a specific person, regardless of their everyday experiences of success.

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