



Instruments for research on transition

Applied methods and approaches for exploring the transition of young care leavers to adulthood

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ABSTRACT

Young people who have been in care show relatively poor outcomes in comparison to young people who have not been in care, and run a high risk of social exclusion. Therefore, the transition to adulthood of young people leaving care is an important topic for research. However, there is still little knowledge about the different research approaches and research instruments that are being used in studying this topic. The aim of the present study is to review the approaches and instruments that are used in empirical studies that focus on young care leavers' transitions to adulthood. The results show that the studies apply a diversity of topics and instruments, but that there is also considerable overlap. To make better comparisons on the transition from out-of-home care to adulthood between different countries, a common research framework and one or more research instruments should be developed that can assess this transition and the situation of young care leavers in diverse social contexts.

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1. Introduction

In the past decade, there has been much interest in and research activity around the issue of care leaving and the transition to adulthood. Projects in various countries have been carried out (cf. Stein, 2008). These studies consistently show that young people leaving out-of-home care are at high risk of material disadvantage and social marginalization. Furthermore, a majority of the care leavers move to independence at 16–18 years of age, whereas most of their peers remain at home well into their 20s (Stein, 2006b). According to Biehal and Wade (1996), youth leaving care have a journey to adulthood that is 'both accelerated and compressed' (p. 443). In comparison to young people who have not been in care, those who have show relatively poor outcomes, especially in terms of education, health and well-being (Munro & Stein, 2008).

However, some of these young people do succeed despite the difficulties they encounter in their transition to adulthood and independence. Therefore, Stein (2005) reviewed 66 empirical research studies carried out between 1986 and 2005 that explored the resilience-promoting factors for young people who have left care.

Resilience was used as a conceptual framework and defined as 'the quality that enables some young people to find fulfillment in their lives despite their disadvantaged backgrounds' (Stein, 2005, p. 1). The review shows that stable placements providing good quality care are important for promoting resilience of young people in care, but that this stability is often lacking in care practice. Other factors that are associated with resilience are helping young people in promoting self-efficacy, having a positive experience at school, and preparing young people for leaving care (Stein, 2005).

To address the cross-national gap of knowledge and comparative work on the transitions of young people leaving care to adulthood, quite recently there appeared another overview on young people leaving care containing information from 16 countries (Stein & Munro, 2008). This review shows that there is a high risk of social exclusion for young people leaving care, despite differences in the care population, types of care placements and legal and policy frameworks within the countries (Stein, 2008). In particular males, minority ethnic or immigrant young people and early care leavers seem to have a higher risk of social exclusion according to several European studies. Furthermore, the development of programs concerned with preparing young people for leaving care is patchy across the 16 countries. In studying the transition from care to adulthood, Sweden and the US make use of relatively large samples and quantitative methods while Australia, Canada and many European countries often use smaller scale and qualitative methods (Stein, 2008). As a result, for the first time an overview is available that shows the situation of care

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leavers in various countries and contains important indications for comparative studies that will be needed in the future.

However, since in recent years the transition of young people from care to adulthood has become more complex (Biggart, Furlong, & Cartmel, 2008; Walther, 2006), it is critical that one reflect on the various topics that have been studied and the research approaches that have been used. The transition process itself has changed with the result that different dimensions of the transition (e.g., work, housing, family formation) are no longer as closely linked as was previously the case (Liefbroer, 2009); sometimes this involves moving back and forth between dependence and independence—the so-called “yo-yo transition” (cf. Walther & Stauber, 2002). This makes that young people are unable to follow predetermined paths and have to choose and cope with various challenges instead.

Despite previous attempts to address the cross-national gap in knowledge about the transitions of young people from out-of-home care to adulthood, there is still little knowledge about the different research approaches and research instruments that are being used in studies focusing on this issue. It is important to know which methods are currently applied in these studies in order to help refine methods and improve comparison of findings from different countries. As was already mentioned above, studies focusing on the transition to adulthood contain both qualitative research methods that are generally focused on developing theories and quantitative research methods which are often focused on testing whether a specific theory is sustainable. Since the studies differ in focus and therefore apply different methods, the types of instruments that are used in these studies will also differ.

The central aim of this article is to review the approaches and instruments used in empirical studies that focus on care leavers' transition to adulthood. The following research questions are the focus of attention:

- What are the topics and approaches applied in the studies on transitioning from care into adulthood?
- Which research designs and instruments are used in these studies?

In reviewing the research evidence, we will focus on empirical studies on this topic from different countries. After describing the method of our study, we will first pay attention to the topics that are applied in these studies. After that, we will focus on the instruments that have been used in the studies. We will conclude our review study by discussing our findings, including recommendations for future research.

2. Method

The starting point of our research analysis is the International Research Network on Transitions to Adulthood from Care (INTRAC). INTRAC is a network of researchers concerned with the process of transition made by young people moving to adulthood from public care (INTRAC, 2010). The network currently consists of 25 members from 16 nation-states.

2.1. Procedure

For the present study, all the INTRAC members have been contacted and asked to provide information on their current or recently completed research projects on ‘the transition to adulthood of care leavers’. In some cases, also other colleagues who are involved in this research area were asked by INTRAC members to provide information about their research. Since it was ascertained that numerous studies were being carried out by doctoral candidates, the members of a recently established network of these young social scientists connected with INTRAC were asked separately to participate in this survey.

2.2. Inclusion criteria

Our inquiry resulted in a total of 34 studies. For inclusion in this research overview, two formal criteria were taken into account. First, attention was paid to whether the topic ‘transition of young care leavers into adulthood’ was at the focus of the particular study. So, the studies had to be focused on making the transition of young people from care into the community. Studies that were in fact not focused solely on the topic of the transition into adulthood but also on the transition of young people from a residential or foster care setting into the community were included as well. Furthermore, we included studies that were focused on the life situation of young people after they had left care (i.e., care leavers).

The second criterion for inclusion was that the study had to be empirical in nature. One of the studies did not meet these requirements, because it consisted of a literature review, and was therefore excluded from the present study. The application of these inclusion criteria resulted in a group of 33 studies that were eligible for inclusion in the present review.

2.3. Instruments

In contacting the INTRAC members, a semi-structured questionnaire was used which was developed for the present study. This questionnaire consisted of open-ended questions regarding the characteristics of relevant research projects (e.g., the country in which the study was conducted, the title and keywords of the study), a table with information on the contents of the study, and two open questions regarding 1) publications or reports on the instruments that were used in the study, and 2) relevant core studies that were of particular significance for the study or for the respective country.

The most important information had to be entered into a table. The first columns in the table concerned information about 1) the key question(s) of the study, 2) the participants and the care setting in which the young adults had lived, and 3) the design of the study, including the research inquiry period. The second part of the table was concerned with information about the instruments used for data collection and analysis. This information was divided by three sub columns comprising information about the name of the instrument, the construct measured, and the psychometric properties, including an assessment of whether these research instruments and methods had already been tested or had been employed in other cross-national studies.

2.4. Study characteristics

The 33 studies were carried out in fifteen different countries with in five continents. The characteristics of the studies are shown in Table 1.

The 22 studies carried out in Europe (67%), were conducted in nine different countries. Five of these studies were conducted in the United Kingdom, four studies in France and three in the Netherlands. In Germany, Romania, Spain and Sweden two studies were carried out. One of the European studies was focused on Switzerland and another one focused on Ukraine. The seven Middle Eastern studies were

Table 1
Countries in which the ‘transition studies’ were carried out (2000–2010).

Country/continent	Number of studies	Percentage
Europe	22	66.7
Asia	7	21.2
North America	2	6.1
Africa	1	3.0
Australia	1	3.0
Total	33	100

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