Making sense of leaving care: The contribution of Bridges model of transition to understanding the psycho-social process

Gabriela Dima [1], Caroline Skehill *

Queen's University Belfast, School of Sociology, Social Policy and Social Work, 6 College Park, Belfast, BT7 1NN, Northern Ireland, United Kingdom

ARTICLE INFO

ABSTRACT

This paper is based on research into the transition of young people leaving public care in Romania. Using this specific country example, the paper aims to contribute to present understandings of the psycho-social transition of young people from care to independent living by introducing the use of Bridges (2002) to build on existing theories and literature. The research discussed involved mixed methods design and was implemented in three phases: semi-structured interviews with 34 care leavers, focus groups with 32 professionals, and a professional-service user working group. The overall findings confirmed that young people experience two different, but interconnected transitions – social and psychological – which take place at different paces. A number of theoretical perspectives are explored to make sense of this transition including attachment theory, focal theory and identity. In addition, a new model for understanding the complex process of transitions was adapted from Bridges (2002) to capture the clear complexity of transition which the findings demonstrated in terms of their psycho-social transition. The paper concludes with messages for leaving and after care services with an emphasis on managing the psycho-social transition from care to independent living.

1. Introduction

The study discussed in this paper explored the experiences of young people leaving public care in Romania, a field which is in its early developmental stage in literature, research and practice within the country. The study sought to give voice to a group of vulnerable young people, care leavers, to access their inner world in order to find out how the outer world should act so that care leavers could improve their transition to post-care life. The overall objective of the study was to bring an in-depth understanding of the experiences of care leavers and draw lessons for leaving care practice and policy from both young people, as service users and professionals, as service providers.

The purpose of this paper is to highlight how the findings demonstrated the complex psycho-social transition young people go through when they leave residential care and have to set up an independent life as adults. As in the case of much of the international research on leaving care, the findings of this study can be explained and interpreted in light of perspectives such as attachment theory, the focal model of adolescence and identity perspectives. In addition, this study proposes an adaptation of Bridges' (2002) framework of transitions as an alternative lens to understand leaving care. The main argument for its potential added value is the clear explanatory way in which it shows how the movement through transition takes place. It will be demonstrated

using this model that while socially, care leavers leap directly into a new beginning, a completely different life, psychologically most are in an 'in-between' zone for a longer time (which could be years), dealing with ending care and new roles of independent living and adulthood. Other research such as Stein's, 2004, 2008 has already brought this issue to the fore. Stein categorized care leavers by core outcomes and described three different categories — Moving On, Surviving and Struggling. He argued that the majority of young people fell into the middle category. Informed by such research, this research sought to provide a model which provided a specific framework within which to theorize this process further with an emphasis on psycho-social transitions. Bridges model of transitions was adapted for this purpose.

The paper begins with an introduction to the Romanian leaving care context and research, a brief methods section and the literature review providing the background for the study. Following is a section on main findings that emerged. In the Discussion, the findings are discussed in the context of Bridges' framework and recommendations for practice are provided by means of Conclusion.

2. Research background: the Romanian leaving care context and research

Leaving care policy and practice evolved in Romania along with the country's major political and welfare changes and reforms. This can be described mainly as three distinctive periods. Firstly, during the communist regime up to 1989, leaving care was a well-defined and straightforward process in that children moved from one to another all-providing system of free education, usually in vocational schools to guarantee

employment in the industrial area, accommodation in factory-owned blocks and food in canteens. While young people were often discriminated against in this regime, the practical options of education and accommodation did give some guarantees in terms of survival post-care (Alexiu, 2000). The situation changed dramatically after 1989 when care leavers were simply left to be 'governed by the rule of chance' (Zamfir & Zamfir, 1997: 105) with absolutely no support after a life in care leaving them with few opportunities to develop independent life skills. This second period of legislative and structural change 1990–1999 is marked mainly by the first child welfare reform 1997[2] which emphasized *decentralization*. At county level, 'Directorates for the Protection of the Child's Rights,' coordinated by a government department were established.[3] Considered as adults able to look after themselves, care leavers were largely ignored by this first post-communist childcare reform. Young people had to leave care at age 18 years unless they were in education.[4] Services were only provided by a few voluntary, private initiatives and NGOs non-governmental organizations and for many young people, help in transitioning from care to independent living was literally non-existent. The third period of reform which began in the early 2000s is marked by increased recognition of care leavers' needs and a clear political will to respond to them. For example, young people's social exclusion was first acknowledged by law in 2002,[5] when care leavers were recognized as a priority group. Under the main provisions evidenced also in practice (Calinoiu, 2002) is the system of employment contracts ('solidarity contracts') and incentives for employers. In 2004, the General Directorate for Social Assistance and Child Protection[6] extended responsibilities toward young people who can now stay in care for up to 2 years over the period they are entitled to, admitting that the state's responsibility does not end at discharge.[7] The high need for developing the independent living skills of young people within the child care system is also recognized.[8] However, although the current legislation for young people leaving care is a progressive one, many of the provisions are not implemented yet (Anghel & Dima, 2008).

A body of research and literature on leaving care in Romania is emerging, mirroring the slow developments in the legal and practice area. Except for the two large-scale national cohort studies on young people at the edge of leaving care (Foundation Children Romania, 1998; Muga, Racoceanu, Alexandrescu, & Polch, 2005), most research is small-scale and of a qualitative nature or mixed designs (Anghel & Beckett, 2007; Baban, Marcu, & Craciun, 2008; Balica, 2002; Buttu, Alexandrescu, & Mihaita, 2001; Marcovici & Dalu, 2002; Marginean, Popescu, Arpinte, & Neagu, 2004; National Agency for Supporting the Initiative of Young People (ANSIT), 2003, 2006; Oxford Research International, 1999). Most research focused on early destinations, leaving care preparation, and young people's social–professional integration. The main findings point to care leavers' housing insecurity, low education and low employability, little preparation for leaving care, stigma and social exclusion. These findings have been replicated in the study reported here (see Dima, 2009) and indeed are generally consistent with research into young people leaving care in other jurisdictions also, such as the UK and the US (Ward & Courtney, 2008). One of the most remarkable aspects of the findings of this study has been the different paces of psychological and social transition which has been rarely distinguished in developments to date.

One of the outcomes of Dima (2009) was a set of recommendations for practice which can take account of the complexity of transition from care which are summarized later in this paper.

3. Methods

The research design was mixed-methods consisting of a qualitative core component with a quantitative supplementary element chosen to enhance description and understanding (Morse, Niehaus, Wolfe, & Wilkins, 2006).[9] The main qualitative component of the research was driven by the belief that, if we want to understand care leaving and make a difference in care leavers' life, it is their voice that should be heard first.

The study comprised of three phases and was based in one county in Romania. Phase One involved in-depth semi-structured interviews[10] with 34 young people aged 20–25 years who had an experience of living independently for two to four years.[11] To ensure richness of research data, purposive sampling was used to include young people from all placement centers around the county. Phase Two involved six focus groups with 32 various professionals from both the voluntary and statutory sectors (social workers, psychologists, placement center manager, NGO project coordinators, managers from the direction). Phase Three involved a *participatory working group* which was established to bring together service users (6 young people) and service providers (6 professionals) to work together on solutions to improve care leaving practice and policy.

The main method for data analysis was Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) (Smith, Jarman, & Osborn, 1999; Smith & Osborn, 2008). This approach was chosen for its potential to study "unexplored territory where a theoretical pretext may be lacking" enabling "meaning and unexpected analysis" of psychosocial issues to arise (Reid, Flowers, & Larkin, 2005: 20). The term 'interpretative phenomenological analysis' signals the dual nature of the approach (Smith, 1996: 264): the phenomenological requirement to understand and 'give voice', exploring the participant's inside view on the phenomenon under study (see Findings: making sense of leaving care section), and the interpretative requirement to contextualize and 'make sense' of these claims from a psychological perspective (see Discussion section) (Larkin, Watts, & Clifton, 2006: 102). Focus group and working group data were analyzed by the use of thematic content analysis. NVivo7 program (QSR International, 2006) was used to help organize and analyze the huge amount of qualitative data.

This methodology, while complex, proved worthwhile in terms of offering an in-depth understanding of the transition from care to independent living from a range of viewpoints which brought to the fore, quite early on, the extent to which some factors impacting on young people in transition are country specific (e.g. the specific legal and policy context referred to above) while others seem to be universal both in terms of practical/social needs (e.g. accommodation, employment, education) and psychological transition. The methodological challenges are explained more fully in Dima and Skehill (2006, 2008).

4. Literature review: theory and research on leaving care

Research evidence on care leavers' outcomes and the conclusion of the analysis undertaken by Stein on the leaving care situation in 16 countries (Stein, 2008) shows a general picture of high risk of social exclusion for young people leaving care, despite variations within different countries. Leaving care is a challenging arena for both practice and

---

[2] Introduced after 8 years of maintaining the former communist child welfare law 3/1970.

[3] Decision 205/1997 on *Organization of the activities of the local Public Administrative Authorities in the field of Child's Rights Protection*.

[4] Emergency Order 26/1997 on *The Protection of Children in Diffculity*.

[5] Law 116/2002 on 'Prevention and Combating Social Exclusion'.

[6] The earlier "Directorates for the Protection of the Child's Rights", coordinated at governmental level by the *National Authority for the Protection of Children's Rights* (ANPDC), and the *Ministry of Labour, Social Solidarity and Family*.

[7] Law 272 (2004) on the *Protection and Promotion of Children's Rights*.

[8] Order 48/2004 on Minimum standards for Services for Independent Life Skills Development aimed at children and adolescents within the child care system, replaced with Order 17/2007.

[9] Described by Morse et al. (2006) as the – 'Qual + quan design', one of the 10 types of mixed-methods designs described by the authors.

[10] An average of two meetings with each young person lasting for about 2 h.

[11] The reference population was care leavers discharged during January 2003 to December 2004 in one county; data collection took place during 2005–2007.