Monika Götzö

FAMILIALIZATION IN WELFARE STATE ARRANGEMENTS: FOSTER FAMILIES IN THE LIFE COURSE OF FOSTER CHILDREN

ABSTRACT: Currently enforced discourses on the significance of familial resources as a precondition for education, employability and social mobility reveal aspects of the interplay between state and families in terms of social integration. Foster families are of special interest when studying the drifts in discourses toward a familialization of life course regimes. The research on foster family care highlights the ambiguous negotiations on responsibilities, competencies, expertise and professionalisation, as well as the call to not colonise the intimate familial context. The authors analyse the interplay of the involved persons in the everyday practices, such as local authorities, legal guardians, therapists, parents of origin, foster parents and foster children. In the article, the beginning and the end of the child protection measure is discussed to see how trajectories and transitions are shaped by those involved, and how their acting can be interpreted in terms of life course regimes.

KEY WORDS: familialization, life course regimes, foster family care, child protection

Familializacija v ureditvi socialne države: rejništvo in življenjski poteki otrok v rejništvu

ZVLEČEK: Sedanji prevladujoči diskurzi o pomembnosti družine kot predpogoja za doseganje izobrazbe ter za zaposljivost in družbeno mobilnost razkrivajo medsebojno prepletenost države in družine, ko gre za družbeno integracijo. Za študij drsenja diskurzov proti familializaciji režimov življenjskih potekov so rejniške družine posebnega pomena. Raziskava pokaže na pomen notranjih pogajanj o odgovornostih, kompetencah, ekspertizi, profesionalizaciji teh družin kot tudi na nujo preprečiti kolonizacijo intimnega družinskega konteksta. Avtorica analizira medsebojno prepletenost oseb, ki so vključene v življenje rejniških družin, kot so skrbniki, terapevti, biološki starši, rejniki, otroci v rejništvu in lokalne oblasti. V članku se osredotoča na začetek in konec ukrepov za zaščito otrok ter na načine vplivanja na njihov življenjski potek.

KLJUČNE BESEDE: familializacija, režimi življenjskih potekov, rejniške družine, zaščita

1. Introduction

Families assume particular importance in the development of welfare state arrangements. They constitute a setting conducive to (re)producing the human capital and resources needed by society (Oelkers 2012: 157). Although government agencies are not experienced directly in family life, social policy measures stabilize certain types of families and family behavior (Kaufmann 1997: 103). Government policies and family forms interfere with each other in a complex way.

Current social policy discourses emphasize the significance of self-responsibility, productivity, and employability (Kessl 2013; Lessenich 2003). Discussion focuses on the production of welfare beyond the state and on family contexts as sites for ensuring exactly these skills, self-responsibility, productivity, and employability. The current balancing out of the division of responsibility between the state and the family for the production of welfare can therefore be referred to as familialization or also as "re-familialization" (Oelkers 2012: 155). Specifically, this concerns the responsibility of parents with regard to the social integration of their children. This view follows the argument that the transfer of cultural, social, and cognitive capital to the next generation depends largely on family resources (Kränzl-Nagl et al. 2003; Olk 2009). Parents who behave in a socially responsible manner within this arrangement are rewarded with less direct state control (Oelkers 2012: 155; Oelkers and Richter 2009: 35; Oelkers 2007).

But what does this specific entanglement between social policies and families mean for children who are unable to grow up in their birth families and whose welfare is subject to child and youth protection measures? The example of foster families, as a specific form of child and youth welfare, opens up a multisited field of research for describing the upheavals, shifts, changes, or re-actualization tendencies in current social policy. It is precisely here, thus the common expectation, that the responsibilities between families, specifically between foster parents, birth parents, and government authorities, are negotiated. The fact that foster care not only constitutes current re-familialization but largely upholds previous practice does not necessarily make it a "residual category" of child and youth protection. Maintaining this modality suggests that the existing model does not contradict current discourses. In Switzerland, to which the research presented here refers, the major legislative overhaul between 2005 and 2013 barely altered the fundamental ideology of leaving foster families "in peace" after placement. In January 2014, the formerly lay guardianship authority was replaced by a professional, interdisciplinary, and firmly established authority (Child and Parent Protection Agency, CPPA).[1] The fact that foster placements declined by 30% in the first four months of 2014 points to the difficult negotiations between government authorities and families.

Internationally, child welfare policy is currently shifting from prevention to early intervention (see, for instance, Satka and Harrikari 2008). Essentially, this discursive shift

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1. The German term is the Kindes- und Erwachsenenschutzbehörde (KESB)

involves a focus less on risk prevention than on individuals acquiring coping skills as early as possible. Accordingly, government measures would be expected to concentrate on early intervention, and on long-term investment in education, occupational training, and employability. However, our research on the potentials of the support provided by the foster care system[2] shows how this field of child and youth welfare relies implicitly on the resources of foster families. This leads to unclear responsibilities, which require foster parents—and foster children—to make a considerable emotional commitment. Not only is this situation tolerated by local authority representatives, but their specific form of cooperation with birth and foster parents favors an arrangement that rests explicitly on the emotional ties between foster children and their foster parents so as to ensure the greatest possible support. For foster families and foster children, this implicit support system, which rests on emotionality and affiliation, presents challenges that place an extreme strain on what is already a fragile relationship. In particular the fact that the very agency representatives who rely on foster parents assuming emotional responsibility also expect such parents to maintain contact with a child's birth parents, and even to actively shape such relationships, clearly reveals the contradictions within this arrangement, whose consequences are far-reaching for those directly affected.

This article explores how the entanglement between family types and the agency-initiated support provided by child and youth welfare affects the relationship structure on the one hand, and the life course of former foster children on the other. It shows that foster families are not just "particular families" (Wolf 2013), but in effect a complex figuration of many stakeholders, including diverse agency representatives and exponents of an extensive expert system.

First, I introduce the background to the research reported here. This includes the research design and the methodological approach. Second, comprehensive theoretical reference establishes how far the present research differs from other literature on foster care. Based on our research findings, the main body of this article argues that f*amilialization* is not simply a "natural phenomenon," but a structure actively produced by those involved. Of interest on this level are public authorities, foster children, and foster parents. How do public authorities manage to delegate responsibility to foster parents and foster children, and how does this mandate, namely, to be and to have to be a family from the day on which placement begins, affect the lifeworld of those concerned?

This article discusses the significance of this form of familiazisation—understood in terms of the above definitions as the delegation of responsibility to foster parents—for the life course of foster children. Based on the specific forms of intervention, coordination, and cooperation between families of origin, foster families, and public authorities at the key transitional points—*entering* and *leaving* foster care—analysis illuminates the

effects of "this foster family setting"[3] on the lifeworld. Precisely these key transitions bring into clear view the forms of cooperation, coordination, responsibility, and referral involved. As shown below, the responsible government agency does not withdraw from a foster child's family context even though its presence is not directly tangible in that lifeworld; rather, it remains present in a more or less concealed way. This, in turn, produces specific dynamics that those concerned must deal with individually, with great emotional commitment, and with strong feelings of uncertainty as regards their individual and social position.

Finally, this article summarizes the importance of this specific figuration for the social integration of former foster children and refers to the findings of current research on care leavers. This comparison indicates parallels between the present research and the general debate on care leavers. One such parallel is the danger of promoting or rather accepting structural disadvantages for foster children because of how this specific care measure is terminated. This point reveals the contradictions and risks of familialization processes in child and youth welfare.

2. Background: Research Design, Methodological Approach, Theoretical Perspective

This article is based on a three-year research project, completed at the end of 2013, on the potentials of support in professionally supervised foster family settings. The research was funded by the Swiss National Science Foundation. Contrastive case studies served to investigate seven different foster family settings based on narrative biographical interviews (conducted with former foster children and their foster parents) and on guided interviews (with legal counsels, guardians, or the representatives of placement organisations).[4] Grounded theory was applied to analyze and theoretically consolidate the case studies.[5] In addition to the individual narratives and their particular rationales, analysis focused on the interaction between the various interviewees, in terms of *doing a foster family*. Particular attention was given to the larger structural, social dynamics manifesting themselves beside specific modalities.[6] Our research design pursued a dual strategy: on a first level, the everyday, lifeworld-related modes of production and coping evident in a particular setting were analyzed; on a second, the implicit societal structures dynamizing and shaping the everyday lifeworld were examined. Following grounded theory (Glaser and Strauss 2005; Stauss and Corbin 1996), the interviews were subject to multiple coding and discussed in evaluation groups. Our study concluded with the theoretical consolidation of the empirical findings into a

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3. "Setting" here means the specific constellation between the individuals involved in foster placement.
4. Full verbatim transcriptions of all interviews were furnished.
5. For more extensive theoretical substantiation, please refer to the final project report (Götzö and Wigger 2014).
6. This follows the basic methodological premise of qualitative social research, that reality is socially constructed (Berger and Luckmann 1996).

higher-order theoretical structure. Our guiding question throughout was: what kind of role is played by those involved in foster family relations at the crucial transitions in the life course of foster children? Who provides what kind of support, and how? Which transitions and biographical turning points are described as particularly challenging by foster children? Our orientation toward transitions and turning points follows the theoretical conceptualization of child and youth welfare as part of a life course regime (Walter and Stauber 2013) that is responsible for raising social expectations about the key phases of a life course.

The empirical findings discussed here refer to Switzerland and cannot be generalized without reservation. The Swiss care system provides well-developed outpatient and inpatient facilities (Haberkern 2009: 70), which have established themselves particularly in urban areas. At the same time, liberal and conservative traditions are bringing forth a "light" version of the activating welfare state (Bonoli 2006), in which existing and new approaches merge. Liberal and conservative ideologies converge precisely as regards their notions of the family: whereas liberal circles hardly advocate stronger state intervention in families and instead emphasize the self-responsibility of families, the traditional, conservative model of the family supports a social policy that assumes that families can, and should, help themselves (Bonoli 2006; Bonoli 2010). Put differently: notwithstanding a well-developed care system, traditional, family-based concepts,[7] which blend with new approaches in a complex way, are prevalent. This convergence manifests itself in extremely diverse local variants because the federal structure of Swiss politics stands opposed to centralistic social policy. Failing clearly allocated jurisdiction over new social policies, policy implementation ultimately lies in the hands of municipal authorities (Bonoli 2010). The same applies to the foster care system: until 2013, no precise statutory basis existed for regulating this system. New legislation regulates jurisdiction and responsibilities much more clearly. As of 1 January 2014, the former, mostly lay guardianship authority was replaced by a new Child and Parent Protection Agency (CPPA). The CPPA is responsible for taking placement decisions. Concrete implementation remains in the hands of local authorities (that is, municipalities) or of contracted private placement organizations, and therefore varies considerably (Götzö and Beck 2013; Keller 2012; Wigger 2012). Current debates and legislative adjustments reveal the diffuse nature of roles, tasks, and responsibilities in this system.

The relevant German-speaking literature on foster care pays only scant attention to this situation. The official, governmental side of this specific form of child and youth welfare is discussed solely in connection with placement procedures (Voll et al. 2008; Arnold et al. 2008). The vast majority of publications not only maintain the strict division of labor between a (professional) expert system and the privacy of foster families but also keep these two areas clearly distinct (Gassmann 2010; Sauer 2008; Wiemann

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7. "Traditional" refers in particular to the concept of the family as a nuclear family consisting of a gainfully employed male adult and a female adult, who is a housewife either not employed or only part-time and who is responsible for childcare.

2012; Wolf 2013). Everyday practice and the relevant literature appear to agree that the division of tasks between professional (public) experts and (private) families is feasible. They also concur that there should be as little intervention in foster families as possible, so that these families can unfold their potential within the intimate sphere of the family.

Our study questions this culturally supported conception of families and foster families as "non-state" and as exclusively private. Contrary to the existing literature, we explore the function of such a conception within the transforming, activating welfare state, which is delegating more and more responsibility to the individual subject and to private social spheres (Oelkers 2012: 155). Following Norbert Elias's concept of figuration as a network of human interdependencies (Elias 1997: 70), foster care can be described as a specific form of interdependent figuration. This concept of figuration enables to consider foster families beyond normative notions of relationships and dependencies, through which the actors of this figuration are interlinked.

Thus, foster families are here understood systematically as part of a public child and youth welfare measure, even though this is not evident in the private lifeworld. As it emerges, this existing figuration develops its own structures. According to Elias, a figuration can therefore be understood as the interaction between structure and process.[8] For the analysis of a concrete foster family setting, this theoretical perspective means that such a setting unfolds its own processual dynamics with the beginning of foster placement, to then develop a specific structure. This dissolves the separation between family and state, or rather makes evident their interdependency, as described by Jacques Donzelot (1980) or Nikolas Rose (1999). In this conception, families do not constitute a lifeworld exempt from government regulation: "The domesticated private family was both to be distinguished from political life and to be defined and priviledged by law; it was to be both freed from detailed prescriptions of conduct and to be permeable to moralization and normalization from outside. It was to become the matrix for the government of the social economy" (Rose 1999: 129). Seen thus, families, educational institutions, and child and youth welfare are all aspects of a specific constellation of the life course regime (Walther 2011: 80–81). Child and youth welfare, and foster care, can be understood as a "co-ruler in the life course regime" (Schefold 2001: 1133), on account of its welfare state mandate of helping individuals to cope with the requirements of the normal life course.

In what follows, the phases of entering and leaving foster care are described in order to reveal the areas of cooperation, coordination, oversight, and jurisdiction. Entering foster care brings into view the emerging network of relations and the dynamics unfolding therein. It is these particular dynamics that foster children and foster

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8. Elias's concept of figuration is used here in two ways: 1. As a concrete unit of investigation, whose limits are determined in terms of specific dimensions of dependency. A figuration, such as a school team, can represent a subfiguration of a larger figuration, such as the school system. 2. As the description of a reciprocal relationship between individuals and society, who are interlinked in a specific way through their respective developmental logic (Treibel 2008 : 46–54).

parents must deal with in their lifeworld. The fact that coping with these dynamics remains limited to an individualized, subjective level and to the immediate lifeworld, as our findings suggest, points to the specific effects of familiazisation processes. As the meshwork of relations emerges, state actors and structures "disappear" beyond reach, because they withdraw from the lifeworld, but indeed not from their position as gatekeepers in the life course (Behrens and Rabe-Kleberg 2000). This leads to difficult, ambivalent situations, which present significant challenges for those concerned, precisely because these situations are individualized and frequently psychologized as difficulties typical of foster children (Nienstedt and Westermann 2007). By contrast, our findings suggest that these difficulties are related just as strongly to the familialization of such assistance, precisely because the governmental side of this support system is not visible in the lifeworld, hence making direct communication impossible.

3. Results

3.1 Entering Foster Care

The first step of foster care is placement in a foster family.[9] Here the life course regime of the welfare state manifests itself. Public authorities intervene in a family and place its child(ren) in another family, which was previously chosen for this purpose. In Switzerland, either the Child and Parent Protection Agency (CPPA) or a mandated guardian looks for a foster family suited to the child and its specific problems. Guardians as a rule serve as contact persons for the resulting network of relations (birth parents, foster parents, foster child). The guardian is obliged to report to the placement agency on the course of the fosterage. However, the government decision-makers ordering the placement never enter into direct contact with those concerned. Already the search for a suitable foster family shows that state actors have a great interest in leaving families to shape foster care on their own. One interviewed guardian observed: "Unfortunately, foster parents or foster families are a scarce commodity. Well, yes, sometimes it is a bit difficult. (…) Then it is a matter of knuckling down or working out some form of cooperation." Establishing cooperation refers to the cooperation between foster parents and birth parents. Many placement agencies, but also experts, consider this level crucial for successful foster care. The account of one guardian, who was looking for a family working to a high professional standard to manage an extremely conflict-ridden case, suggests that the responsibility for arranging contacts and resolving conflicts tends to lie with the families:

> The situation was so complex that a large foster family able to provide therapy and social education was considered better suited to dealing with the existing conflicts between the parents, particularly between mother and child. To establish contact with the biological parents […] because, as practice shows, family care, ordinary family care, tends to be so overwhelmed by such complex siutations, particularly when the birth parents have expectations or make demands that perhaps overextend the foster parents.

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9. For an extensive discussion of placement procedures, see Götzö (2013) and Götzö and Wigger (2014).

Although guardians recognize the difficulties inherent in the cooperation between foster parents and birth parents, the above-cited statements suggest that as a rule they strive to initiate conflict resolution on the level of the parental couples. Needless to say that conflict resolution on this level is highly charged emotionally. At issue are existential questions about affiliation and legitimacy, namely, which parents are allowed to express which legitimate interests toward a child. Put differently, the government-mandate measure is neither discussed nor is it made a subject for discussion, because placement seemingly naturalizes the lifeworld it creates. Now it is once again a matter of "families." Practice oriented toward such normative notions of the family demands considerable normalization from those involved (foster children, foster parents, but also birth parents).[10] Normalization requires emotional and relational work, which tests and evaluates the foster relationship and thereby presents a major structural and cultural challenge: foster parents educate a child placed in their care *on behalf of the state*. Our interviews include animated and emotional accounts of how deeply concerned foster children are with questions of belonging and "real love,"[11] and how they yearn for a "normal family." Multiple affiliation is not so much the key issue: the foster children we interviewed coped very well with having several parents. Respondents distinguished their foster parents (who looked after them during a particular stage of their lives) from their birth parents (who could not manage to care for them). Birth parents were referred to as "real parents" while foster parents were "like real parents."

Guardians hardly played a role for foster children: many could not recall the name of a guardian or frequent relocations meant that there were different guardians, whose names the children could not keep apart. Most of the former children regarded this as a lack of interest in them as human beings, although they considered the support received to have been helpful: "But then she [the guardian] must also stand by you and just think, well, you know, I have got 27 other brats (…) and, oh, number seven now has a problem."

Guardians, who are a public authority's only tangible representatives and exponents, become peripheral figures in the support system not only because of how they position themselves within the foster structure, but also because the powerful decision-makers in the background never come into the picture. Foster children frequently agreed with their foster parents that guardians had no idea about the lives of those concerned and therefore were not legitimated to intervene in the network of relationships. This happened, for instance, when foster care had transformed increasingly into a "normal family." In one representative case, a guardian's interventions were interpreted as unnecessary, as coming "from too far out," and hence as not particularly helpful. This guardian agreed to visit the foster family only if it had any needs, but this was never the case. The fact that the authorities accepted this arrangement was related to how this particular guardian interpreted her own position. Guardians are responsible for

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10. On the dynamics of normative concepts of the family in the foster care system, see 2013.
11. In what follows, excerpts from the interviews conducted with foster children are inserted in the main text for the sake of readability. Full transcriptions are available (in German).

the entire setting and do not see themselves as representing the interests of one of the involved parties, not even the child's. One guardian contrasted his role to family roles:

> The reality is that I am not a godfather, nor can I be one in my role as a guardian. Nor am I am mate. I have a specific function. Getting too friendly with the foster family makes me lose credibility in the parents' eyes. Identifying too strongly with the foster parents also makes me lose any credibility. The child must experience and perceive me in my role as a guardian, in a specific function. I am neither a godfather nor a surrogate godfather.

The fundamental problem evident here concerns public jurisdiction, that is, the responsibility of government authorities and their representatives, and as such the functioning of the entire support system. Guardians position themselves at this juncture, where their unrelatedness to the foster families is interpreted and experienced as a lack of interest. Here a split occurs between an outer, bureaucratic support system, which seems not being interested in the individual case, and the support lent by genuine, because emotionally caring foster parents as a source of legitimate assistance. This split engenders far-reaching dynamics for a foster child's further life course. In our interviews, authority-mandated familialization, which foster families are left to carry into practice, seems to be the reason for resisting anything that disturbs the normalcy of a "normal family, and for removing or excluding any such interference from the lifeworld. Thus, almost all the foster children that we interviewed told us that they had discontinued the therapy organized by the responsible authority with their foster parents' consent. Moreover, they rejected their guardians as disinterested strangers, whose ideas or reservations the children branded as illegitimate and ignored as far as possible. Thus, the further support system was edged out of the foster family's lifeworld. Most guardians accepted their exclusion, because they agreed with the foster families that protecting a family's intimacy is a legitimate concern. This view, however, contradicts their mandate to oversee foster care and to monitor a child's welfare. Thus, *doing foster family* becomes *doing family*. Concerning the significance of the government authority in shaping the transitions in a child's life course, the involved adults consider foster placement (that is, entering a foster family) as a solution to a problem. Placement is considered to basically fulfill a government mandate. From a lifeworld perspective, the regulatory and supervisory function assigned to mandate holders such as guardians seems anachronistic, or even as illegitimate for successful placement. One foster father described this as follows:

> Well, I have always taken the view that most welfare offices, well you know, I wouldn't expect them to, anyway most [author's note: incomprehensible passage] don't really understand //mhm// it's probably a small number of their clients, and they don't really understand, and I wouldn't expected professional support //well, yes// but that one could work in peace and didn't have to argue over money all the time, but that one simply work on a normal level.

With some few exceptions, the disparaging, discontented, and derogatory remarks made by foster children and their foster parents about the supervisory authorities indicate that the members of foster family internalize the government mandate and consider it their "private business." The authorities are meant to provide favorable conditions, but

otherwise to keep out of the foster relationship. The former foster children consider their parents' rejection of, and their successful battles against, guardians or therapists as a sign of genuine human interest. More pointedly, the less government involvement, the more a foster family's privacy is able to develop. In line with the current specialist debate, it could be argued that professional welfare workers should stay out of a foster family's privacy (Klaus Wolf speaks of professionals colonising foster families, 2013) so that such families can unfold their potential as families.

But this conceptualization could be discussed diametrically opposed, too: concealing the government mandate and rejecting professional "meddling" places a significant strain on the manifold relations within foster families. Questions of affiliation, identity, and love override any concern with the actual structural particularities of foster care. The concealment of measures, by the involved adults, in particular by the responsible authority, together with its withdrawal from their lifeworld, deprives foster children of the possibility of engaging openly and actively with this life phase and with its particular setting as a part of public child and youth welfare. Instead, and to re-emphasize this point, genuine interest and emotional affection are put to the test. Foster children suffer and question themselves: many of the interviewed children were ridden with self-doubt, and asked themselves " am I okay?" Conflicts between foster children and foster parents, as described by the children in particular as regards their adolescence as an extremely difficult life phase, fundamentally destabilize the structure of human relations and identity within a foster family. Under these conditions, foster children may break off the relationship with their foster parents, go into hiding, or make contact with their birth parents. Unless they return voluntarily, the support system barely succeeds in catching these children in its safety net.

In addition to the effects of the familialization-oriented dynamics generated by the support system, which are described here as the highly demanding management of emotions, far-reaching consequences for the children's life course and their social integration become apparent. The fundamental notion of government decision-makers manifests itself on yet another level: the complete absence of an explicit educational and integration mandate for foster parents. Our study revealed that foster placement constitutes no explicit long-term integration mandate aimed at a child's future. The authorities, instead, rely on a kind of "family automatism," which, however, is left unexplained. As a welfare measure, "foster placement" seems to be oriented exclusively toward the family of origin's past and serves to regulate a new present life for the child. But it remains open whether and how the integration expected of families nowadays is assigned to foster parents. This uncertainty is problematic. Some of the foster parents in our sample took great pains to support and promote their foster children during their education, professional training, and career entry phase. However, foster parents were left to rely on their personal notion of successful social integration. Thus, child advancement varied significantly: family support was aimed at psychological stabilization, at attracting the least possible attention at school, or at completing an apprenticeship.

The absence of agreed objectives, which would not only need to be formulated but also government-funded, can be interpreted as a disadvantaging dynamics of the foster care system. More pointedly, the state eschews its role of clearly supporting foster families, as an integral part of the child and youth welfare system, in achieving long-term objectives aimed at social integration. Narrowing the perspective to emotion-centered tasks also means economizing financial contributions. Foster placement remains decidedly more cost-effective than institutional placement. Instead, the authorities rely on the hope that foster parents, owing to their emotional bond with their foster child, will feel obliged to vouch for its comprehensive social integration. One guardian observed: "Well, yes, this is something one always for, or that they [foster children] can somehow strike roots in a foster family, in the sense of establishing a sustainable relationship or relationships." Sustainable relationships mean that foster parents assume more tasks and thereby commit themselves beyond the limited duration of foster care.

The absence of future-oriented objectives parallels a gap within the literature on foster care. The considerable literature on early intervention, education, the forms of cooperation expected with schools, and later professional integration (Lange and Xyländer 2011) appears to be aimed solely at biological parents and fails to consider foster care. Although this narrow discursive focus on education and employability under the conditions of an activating welfare state must be eyed critically, the absence of this discursive arrangement within foster care is noticeable. The significance of parents promoting their children's education and professional training, as formulated for biological families in connection with the activation paradigm, does not seem to apply to foster children. Thus, the educational background of foster parents is no selection criterion. Foster families seem to be a "repository" or "refuge," aimed primarily at protecting the child against the conditions of its family of origin. Whereas this perspective represents a legitimate and important achievement in terms of child welfare, as explained previously it limits the potential of a foster family setting to an attachment- and emotion-centered structure. This, in turn, allows the state to curb the allocation of both personnel and funding. When children leave foster care, this basic orientation reveals a further problem which, as shown below, is also mentioned in the current research on care leavers.

3.2 Leaving Foster Care

Generally, leaving foster care is not a matter of personal choice, but a fact of life determined by legislation. Officially, the state terminates its responsibility for the age-appropriate education of foster children when they reach the age of 18 or complete their initial (occupational) training. Government decision-makers may enter a foster child's life for the first time when it leaves foster care. They appear in the guise of local authority representatives, who invite the child to the village or town hall to announce that the municipality will no longer bear the costs of foster care. The interviewed former foster children did not describe leaving foster care as a turning point in their lives. Subjectively, our respondents did not perceive the government-defined endpoint as a significant lifestyle change. This suggests that up until that transitional point familialization had

proven successful, as a development explicitly welcomed and desired by guardians. Thus, a foster family often becomes a real family when foster care formally ceases: family members gather for family celebrations or on public holidays, and advice is sought on such occasions. In some cases, foster parents become grandparents, foster siblings real siblings. At least in our sample, there is a tendency toward further consolidating these relationships through kinship ties and terminology. Continuing such relationships, however, can succeed only through maintaining communication and relationships. In the event of conflicts, or when relations break off, foster children are not legally entitled to claim financial or other kinds of support from their foster parents. Foster parents continue to support their foster children, depending on the intensity of the relationship and their sense of duty.

Structurally, the legally defined end of foster care, either at the age of 18 or on completion of initial training, does not coincide with successful social integration in terms of foster children attaining professional independence. With a view to the life course of foster children, leaving care is a life phase characterized by various overlapping processes, such as entering professional life, forming an identity as an independent adult, and trying out one's independence. Precisely this crucial transition reveals the consequences of government (non-) intervention, of lacking objectives, and of the significance of orienting foster toward family structures. Current transitions research suggests that this life phase should not be considered to be a unique passage toward leading an independent life even if socially speaking it brings forth the "young adult." Rather, the school-to-work transition proves to be a holistic, variegated process shaped by different interacting partial transitions: school, vocational training, work, family relationships, gender-related identity, peer relations, and youth culture (Konietzka 2010; Scherger 2007; Walther and Stauber 2007). This transition is described as a prolonged, contradictory phase involving potential reversibility, and during which "setbacks" must be expected. Yet the end of foster care conveys a clear sense of an unequivocal and definite transition: at the age of 18, young people in foster care are discharged into independence by the authorities. What appears to be self-evident in other types of families, namely, the continued child-parent relationship, the hope of not being abandoned, and being able to return "home" in times of crisis, must be negotiated individually in foster family settings and continuously reaffirmed.

Our biographical interviews indicate that the development of foster children does not simply "lag behind" (Nienstedt and Westermann 2007) that of other adults. What emerges, instead, is a situation produced by the foster family setting as a particular figuration that points to definiteness where in effect there is none. Expecting unequivocal outcomes as an independent adult leads, among other things, to assessing "divergences" as non-standard and to attributing these to a foster child's personal shortcomings. On leaving foster care, foster children who first wish to discover whether they can manage on their own or whether living with their birth parents might be an option worth exploring as a part of finding their own identity, at this point in their lives unconsciously endanger the fragile, communication-based affiliation with their foster parents.

Precisely such affiliation, which is produced communicatively and emotionally over the course of foster care, and which constitutes successful familialization, either establishes the basis for continuing the foster relationship or explains its failure. What applies to coping with a normal life course holds true for foster children in particular: still effective standardization and inequality mechanisms can confront young people with conflicting situations, above all in transitional phases, during which they must prove themselves in manifold ways and legitimate their decisions toward the outside world. This, in turn, creates uncertainties about one's identity and position in society. At the same time, coping with the different partial transitions constituting the transition to adulthood presents a significant challenge. "One of the principal challenges of late-modern transitions […] is to cope simultaneously with the requirements of different transitional areas, which often even contradict each other, but at least follow their own rhythms and rationales" (Walther and Stauber 2007 : 35).

Foster care ends precisely at this culmination point. It is now left to the ability of the young adults and to the goodwill of their foster and birth parents whether and how the existing support system continues. Current transitions research suggests a continued need for support. As a rule, however, such support is neither envisaged nor aspired to by the authorities. Thus, shaping foster care and its structures fails to take up current insights and social developments. These back-and-forth movements toward adulthood extend the obligations of families, which Böhnisch, Lenz and Schröer (2009) have described as the "familialization of transitions." Thus, "In this specific transitional phase, youths still depend on their parents; the detachment process is delayed and family care extended. Here, a familialization of the transition becomes evident: the birth family is compelled to make the transition its own business" (p. 242). Precisely this development favors the familialization practices aspired to thus far in foster care, albeit in a paradoxical way: where few conflicts exist, the family prevails as a support structure; but where there are conflicts, both the family and its support cease to exist.

What emerges as regards the life course regime is that foster children are seriously at risk of suffering structural disadvantages: whereas other young adults can usually rely on broad-based and reliable support, foster children may suddenly find themselves left to their own devices. After receiving government support, they must now tackle the youth-to-adult transition on their own. The end of foster care requires foster children to have particular creative skills. These include the ability and the dexterity to behave as a "biographical actor" with "biographical knowledge" (Heinz 2000), based on previous experience and with a view to pursuing future possibilities and objectives. Where Stauber und Walter (2007) identify the development of biographical skills as a task, among others, for social work, the foster family setting proves both contradictory in this respect and almost overwhelming in relation to the tolerance of uncertainty.

4. Conclusion

The study discussed here reveals that entering and leaving a foster family setting involves various overlapping partial transitions. For the foster child, these transitions create a particularly challenging situation. Given the famialization of a government measure and the associated exclusive reference to the lifeworld, the foster child must cope with this challenge on an individual, emotional, and relational level. Whereas affilation and identity are crucial points of orientation in this respect, they correspond only partly to the initial structure and therefore only function partly as a solution or as coping action. Both the transition into and out of foster care reveal problems that can be related to the familialization endeavors of government authorities. Given the absence of overriding objectives at the start of foster care, relying on foster parents assuming emotionally based responsibility for their foster children can lead to a highly unfavorable life course. Foster families can lose sight of vocational training and career entry if their emotional bond is weak and if the parent-child relationship is conflict-ridden. Instead, questions of affiliation and identity move to the fore. The convergence of leaving foster care with the ambivalent, long-term transitional phase to early adulthood, which is characterized by "setbacks," points to a further, significant problem of the foster care system: foster care ends precisely when today's young adults have a particular need for support.

Our study showed that the theoretical, practical, and research-oriented focus of the foster care system on the quality of the parent-child relationship obscures a systematic view of the life course and social integration as two crucial dimensions. On the one hand, the familialization of support, together with the elusive role of government authority representatives in the foster child's lifeworld, means that those affected hardly think of claiming state benefits or support. Nor do foster children appropriate this life phase in relation to child and youth welfare and thus concern themselves with the support system. Conceiving foster families as normal but special families represents an ideology which, analogous to the (re-)familialization of welfare state arrangements, serves to release the state early on from its dual responsibility: for ensuring that children can grow up appropriate to their age and needs and for enabling social integration appropriate to their life course. Amidst liberal cost-cutting discourses, this ideology seems both correct and viable. This means, however, that the state leaves successful social integration to the emotional bond between foster parents and foster children.

Although celebrated in the literature, a foster family's privacy and emotional ties need to be eyed critically in this respect. Quite simply because social integration can fall by the wayside should an emotional bond fail. The discussion on "care leavers" at the transition to independence (Köngeter et al. 2012: 262) points to the need for further research and theory-building in the foster care system. Moreover, practice also needs to consider the findings of international research on residential child and youth care (institutions, foster families) (Stein 2006; Walther 2011). Such research calls for shifting existing support structures toward more "aftercare." Most strikingly, child education services ignore the generally altered modes of transition and still orient the

provision of help, and its end, toward the age norm of 18 years, that is, when foster children come of age. This life phase is hence described as a status passage, "in which an accelerated transition to adulthood is institutionalized and thus imposed on young adults" (Schaffner and Rein 2013: 264; see also Rosenbauer 2013; Stauber 2013).

The foster care system has analogous desiderata and gaps. Along the lines of the proposals formulated so far for youth welfare, foster children must not only receive stronger support on their way toward independence, but such support must also remain keenly aware of their participation opportunities (Rosenbauer 2013; Stecklina and Stiehler 2006). Thus, the foster care system, as a part of child and youth welfare, falls in step with this problem, without this alignment being reflected in the relevant literature or in practice to date. And yet foster children are at risk of suffering structural inequality, which they cannot simply compensate for. Given the emotion-focused nature of foster care, they are challenged to establish unequivocal affiliation on a daily basis. Doing so may induce great uncertainty about identity-formation, role models, and ideas about the future. Our findings suggest that the foster care system needs to be seen as a figuration, in terms of the manifold interactions between different stakeholders, such as foster families and birth families, government authority representatives and experts, and other socialization agents important in the life course. This perspective would enable individuals to continue claiming government support, which is currently undergoing transformation, rather than such assistance being excluded from their lifeworld.

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Author's data:
Monika Götzö, PhD
University of Applied Sciences St. Gallen, Switzerland
e-mail: *monika.goetzoe@fhsg.ch*