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**YOUTH TRANSITION FROM CARE TO
INDEPENDENT LIVING**

PhD Thesis Abstract

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Key words: adolescent, youth, foster care, adolescence-youth transition, independent living, identity, child protection system, parenting.

This thesis aims to describe the youth transition process from the child protection system to the independent adult living. The presented data may facilitate in-depth knowledge of this process and can generate a number of possible solutions.

The main purpose of this thesis is to present the youth perspective, particularly those who are in foster care, on the transition to independent living. We focused on foster care, because both at national and international level, the tendency is to develop family-type services as a priority, and to restrict residential care. We also explored the perspective of adults working with these young people – the foster parents ¹.

The core argument of the research is the complex understanding of the process of preparing young people for leaving the child protection system - what criteria and strategies the child protection system applies (*in loco parentis*), how the foster family system is functioning, and especially who these young people are and what is their perception on this process.

The literature shows that there is no efficient working model yet, adapted to the needs of this category of youth in the transition to the independent living. The programs and strategies in this field are still in a developing stage. The effectiveness and long-term outcomes of the strategies that prepare young people for independent living in Romania are not operationalized, quantified and included in longitudinal studies.

In this context, it is imperative to understand how things actually work, what are the strengths and the vulnerabilities of the strategies that are applied. Otherwise, we risk proposing different intervention strategies and continuously find ourselves in the same point of trial and error, making it difficult to develop long-term sustainable programs.

In addition to the data regarding young people's preparation for the transition to independent living (as perceived by youth and foster carers), the research also includes a set of recommendations for optimizing programs intended to facilitate the services for youth in child protection system.

The main research questions that guided us in this thesis are:

What are the specific aspects of preparing the foster youth transition to adulthood in Romania and how do they relate to residential protection?

What criteria should be met to facilitate this transition and entry into the adult-specific roles?

What are the developmental milestones for young people in the protection system that can facilitate this process?

What parental or functional characteristics specific to foster care are necessary for an effective social and emotional training with the transitioning youth?

What services are offered to young people in foster care in the period preceding this transition, in order to facilitate socio-professional insertion after exiting care?

¹ In this thesis we use “foster parent”, “foster carer” or “caregiver” as interchangeable terms, in order to describe “asistentul maternal” – the Romanian equivalent to this type of child protection service.

What are the strengths and weaknesses of the training/preparation services in terms of the youth's needs, the accessibility of the services and their results?

In order to answer these questions, we conducted two studies, the first including young people who benefit from a protection measure and the second research - adults who manage the care and the transition preparation services for youth who age out of care (foster parents). Both researches shared the assessment and the analysis of the preparation process for independent living, from the perspective of the two major categories of actors involved (transitioning youth, foster parents).

Participants. In this research we presented and analyzed data collected from 220 participants. The first research was performed on a group of 54 young people in foster care (average age 17,20 years, time spent in protection system, $M = 12,03$ years), whose answers were compared with those of a similar group of young people in residential care. The second research included a group of 112 foster parents (the participants' mean age, 55.6 years, most of them married 92,86%, and with a secondary education qualification 89,29%).

Design, methodology and instruments. The methodology we used was intended to examine and better understand the variables that were identified in the research questions. In both studies, we pursued both individual and contextual factors, using a variable analysis as well as a person-centered analysis.

The design of the study was both quantitative and qualitative, based on both numerical data and observations on participants' experiences and knowledge. The qualitative part aimed to identify as many practical implications of the data as possible.

The main data collection method was the sociological survey (based on interview and questionnaire). There were used 8 questionnaires and 6 interview guides intended for the individual interviews and the focus-groups, generating a large amount of both quantitative and qualitative data. 40 individual interviews and 3 focus groups were conducted and processed. We used standardized instruments, validated on the Romanian population, or tools adapted by the questionnaires relevant to the issues we studied. The instruments that were used have been determined to be both reliable and valid for the purposes of analysis and reviewed for reasons why they were appropriate for this study.

The quantitative and qualitative data presented and analyzed in the research were collected between 2013-2017 and their processing was carried out using two analytical tools: Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS) - for quantitative data; Atlas.ti - for qualitative data. The Microsoft Office Publisher was used for the presentation of certain data (layout/outputs).

Statistical processes included frequency and average analysis, correlation and variance analysis.

The thesis structure includes five chapters:

- the first chapter focuses on addressing the studied issues in the context of national and international social phenomena regarding youth transition to independent living (in general) and foster youth transitioning (in particular).

- the second chapter brings information based on recent studies and with high relevance in this field, necessary to provide context for the theoretical framework,

- chapters three and four include the quantitative and qualitative data analysis, as well as their coherent integration in line with the theoretical framework and current research.

- in the final chapter, the thesis presents conclusions and recommendations with practical applicability and we included a model of approach and understanding of the transition of youth from foster care to independent living, based on both theoretical and practical premises.

CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION TO THE PROBLEM OF THE YOUTH TRANSITION TO THE INDEPENDENT LIVING

A developed society depends on the functioning and independence of emerging adults. The inability of young people to successfully transition to adulthood places families and the community in a disadvantaged situation - under the constraint of continuing to support these young people. For this reason, it is important to know the barriers and the success factors in training foster youth for the independent living - thus maximizing the development of the new generation of adults who have previously benefited from a special protection measure (Copeland, 2010; Furstenberg et al., 2004).

Starting from these premises, in this study we sought to understand the factors that influence the process of youth transition from foster care towards an independent living and to identify what the protection system (foster care in particular) offers to this group of young people - strategies, means, the effective preparation of young people to leave the protection system.

Research on youth in foster care shows that the population in this category is experiencing a significant number of challenges during the transition to adulthood. In order to alleviate these difficulties, different strategies for independent and intra-system training have been developed, annual financial resources being consistently invested in this area. However, even in developed countries, that have a much wider and more sustainable experience with the foster care program, there is relatively little research on training programs and services that prepare young people for independent living and their long-term effects. One of the reasons is probably represented by the methodological constraints that affect the possibility of generalizing data (Collins, 2001; Montgomery et al., 2006; Naccarato & DeLorenzo, 2008; in Mares, 2010).

Youth in the protection system are a vulnerable group, often exposed to discrimination and social marginalization. Now, there are programs at a national level (at both state and NGO level) intended to support young people leaving care. These programs support youth in order to adapt as effectively as possible to the requirements of adult independent living - but as we can see from existing statistics, their situation still requires sustained interventions.

In the research, we were broadly interested in the factors influencing the youth transition from care to independent living in the context of social phenomena regarding youth. Our goal was to see to what extent this process can be considered problematic for the actors involved (if we can address this transition as a social problem).

In a narrow sense, we have tried to understand how foster care works, if, in addition to effective protection services, it also provides training on the transition to independent living for youth in care, and whether the provided training generates the premises for an effective socio-professional insertion of these young people.

Transitional patterns of the young population

The youth transition to independent living has raised a high interest in academic environment, politics and the media, over the last few years. The budgetary effects of an inefficient transition, emigration and the concern for other related phenomena such as

decreasing birth rates or low congruence between education and labor market demands have led the states to reflect on the development of effective social policies to facilitate youth transition to independent living.

Our assumption in this thesis is that if the transition to adult roles is easier and more suited to the needs of young people, in the long run the economic and social effects will be more favorable for both individuals and the state.

The transition to adult life involves a number of specific (sub)transitions such as completing studies and entering the occupational field, leaving the parental home, establishing a couple relationship, and finally, yet importantly, parenting. Initially, this process was perceived as completed with all these stages. However, more recently, studies show that intermediate stages also appear, characterized by extensive exploration of identity, lifestyle and career opportunities - explorations that delay some of these transitions. The transition to adult life must be seen both as a process and as a developmental stage, requiring certain psychological acquisitions, social skills and especially the presence of activism (Arnett, 2000; Buchmann, 1989; Elder, 1985; Elder et al., 2004; Elder & Shanahan, 2006; Furstenberg et al., 2005; Gauthier, 2007a; George 1993; Heckhausen, 2002; Shanahan, 2000; Shanahan & Porfeli, 2002).

Analyzing the prevalence and timing of transition events in Europe, three major trends are observed:

- the transition to independent living has been considerably extended for younger cohorts, with several markers of the transition across multiple stages being noticed.

- there are age differences in the implementation of the transition (the biggest differences being around the age of 25); gender trends are similar without significant differences between men and women - except that men tend to set up a family later than women.

- there is also a de-standardization of the transition to adulthood, specific sequences of events are experienced by a lower number of young people, they appear to more dispersed ages and show a wider variation in duration (Buchmann & Kriesi, 2011).

The transition to independent living is marked by a growing degree of uncertainty at European level. Societal characteristics may, however, mediate the impact of micro-level factors. In this context, state institutions can influence transition behaviors by establishing a set of opportunities and constraints that young people have different responses to (e.g. state support during the transition period is an effective strategy to address the needs of young people for autonomy and experimentation). For example, inefficient housing accessibility policies for young people are associated with a postponement of leaving the parental home and a delay in certain transitional events; whereas a highly vocationally oriented education system allows a controlled and stable entry into the labor market (Mills & Blossfeld, 2005; Mulder et al., 2002; Sobotka & Toulemon, 2008).

Similar patterns are also recorded in the United States of America, where the conceptualization of adulthood and the temporal framework to achieve it are changing. This involves additional consequences and costs for the institutions that support emerging adults (Schoeni & Ross, 2004; Copeland, 2010).

Romanian studies show that young people are generally poorly trained for the transition to independent living, being mainly financially and psychologically dependent on

their family support. Young people tend to perceive the socio-professional environment as unfriendly, with many difficult obstacles to overcome and tend to have low skills for risk assessment and crisis management (Anghel & Dima, 2008). According to the recent studies, the socio-professional insertion of youth is mainly affected by the integration into the labor market, education level, residency, health status and social participation (Neagu & Petrescu, 2017).

Young people in the protection system - a vulnerable group²

Annually, about 5,000 young people are due to leave care, having to integrate into social and professional areas. It is a difficult stage for any young person, but all the more difficult for youth who benefited from a public or private protection measure and are left without previous sources of support (Muga et. al, 2005).

Several studies have identified some dysfunctional aspects of the Romanian child protection system, such as: the lack or low quality of training for independent living; the imbalance between rights and responsibilities; the pressure of child protection specialists on young people who are expected to become "instant" adults; lack or insufficient training of the staff to successfully manage the work with these young people, low work satisfaction of social workers, etc. (Anghel & Beckett, 2007; Câmpean, 2004; Dickens & Serghi, 2000; in Anghel & Dima, 2008)

Similar difficulties are mentioned in a recent study by Neagu and Petrescu (2017): the non-unitary development of support services for post-institutionalized youth and of the specific socio-professional integration programs; insufficient staff in both case management and specialists in developing independent living skills; marginalization/exclusion of foster youth in education and employment; insufficient psychological and financial support provided by the public system to foster parents to support assisted young people; poor development of social and professional integration state services; lack of support for the development of social and professional integration services by the NGO sector.

In addition, for youth in care, the systemic and social expectations are that the transition to independent living to keep following the classical standards: education, professional career, residence, and family. Once they leave care, they no longer have the opportunity to return to their old residence, while young people in the general population have the opportunity to return to their parents, if things do not meet their expectations as they start the independent living as adults. This increases the gap and the disadvantages of foster youth comparing to young people in the general population.

Conceptual model of youth transition from care to independent living

In this thesis, starting with the recognition of the youth transition to independent living complexity, we chose to study the interdependency of individual and systemic factors and the processes that may facilitate this transition.

The main transitional aspects, presented in the figure 1, are developed, detailed and studied in the thesis.

² Some sections of subchapters 1.2.2. – 1.2.4. were published in Boldiș, I. (2014). Youth Transition From Care to Independent Adulthood: a Social Problem? Social Work Review, XIII, 4/2014, 1-19.

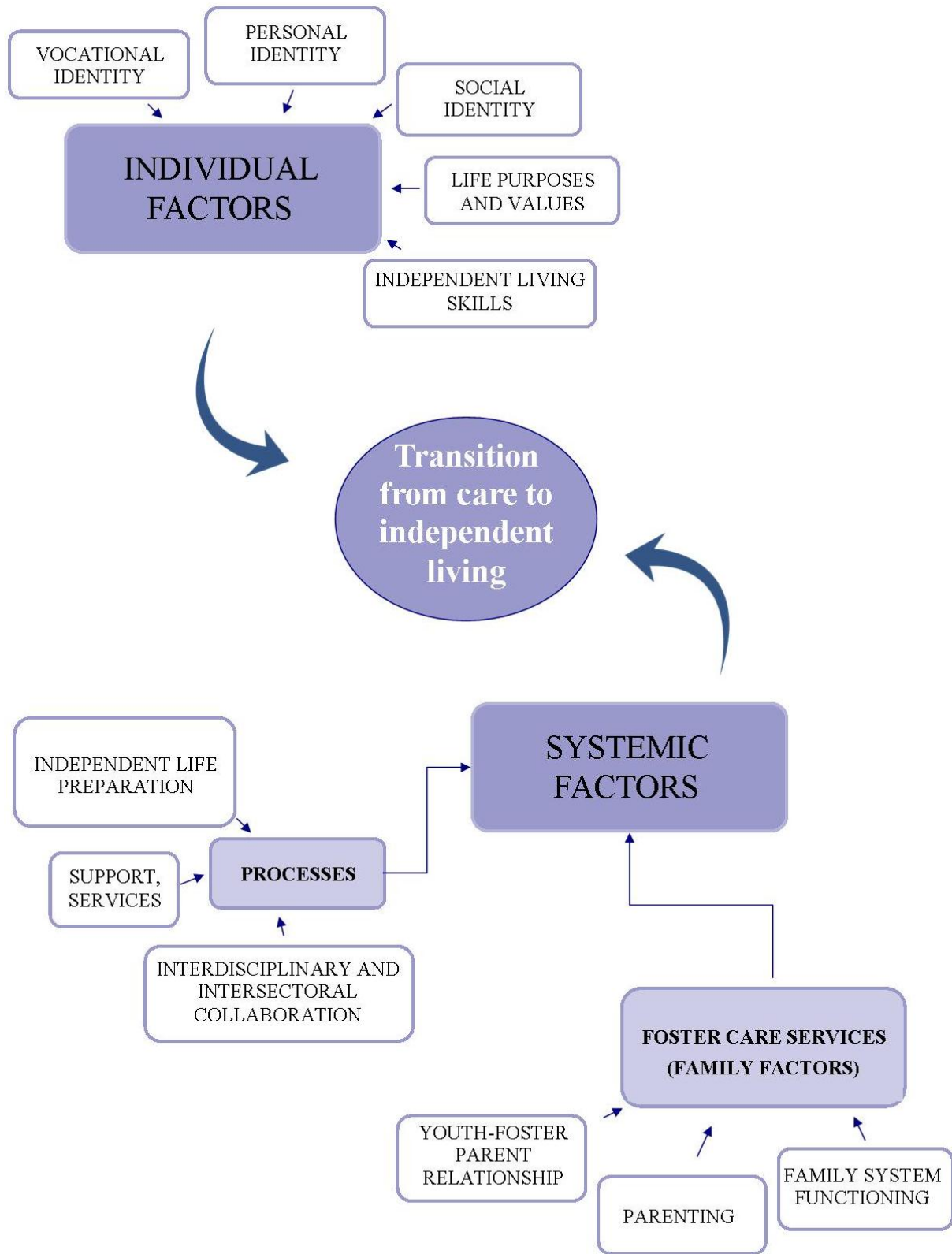


Figure 1. Factors that may produce effects on the youth transition from care to independent living process.

Because youth identity is a salient factor emerging during this major life transition, we chose to study and deepen its understanding in the first study presented in the thesis. Identity processes impact every underlying transition: from education to work, from family to independence, etc. So, exploring this processes is necessary in order to have a perspective view of this major transition, but also for determining the barriers and the facilitating factors that may produce effects during the transition from care to independent living.

Inside the child protection system, the target group of youth we included in the study benefited from family-type services (foster care), that is why we investigated foster families functioning and the extent to which these services succeed to address to the youths' needs, in the period before exiting care and starting independent adult life.

Regarding the systemic processes (no matter if we discuss the family system, the child protection system or the macro-system) that support the transition to independence, we chose to study the youth and foster carers' perception of these processes and of the services involved. These actors' view on the system and processes functioning is critical for their attitudes and responses that may occur towards the systemic solutions and initiatives regarding the youth future.

CHAPTER 2

TRANSITION THEORIES

In the second chapter of the thesis, we approached various theories of transition. We also presented the systemic theory and the theories about the parent-youth relationship (relevant to the foster parents-youth relationship), with an immediate applicability in the study of the youth transition to adulthood.

An important part of the literature on the transition to adulthood has developed from the concept of "emerging adulthood" - a period in which young people consider that they passed the age of adolescence but have not yet completed the transition to adulthood. It is a period when youth develop their identities, explore various possibilities of life and focus on their own self (Arnett, 2000; 2007; Blatterer, 2010; Cote et al., 1996; in Ostroot & Branaman, 2016).

Contemporary transition theories address particularly pragmatic aspects such as the labor market flexibility, the family dynamics and the expansion of the education sector. Beck (1992) suggests that in the transition to adulthood, in the context of the modern society, young people build their identity based on their affinities and not based on family constraints or social class. Other authors (Furlong & Cartmel, 1997; Skelton, 2002) pay special attention to structural barriers that restrict young people's opportunities to pursue their goals or desires (Worth, 2009).

Transitions involve different paths, phases and multiple social actors, as well as a high level of development, complexity and uncertainty, being a consequence of alignment between different developmental levels and a process involving interactions between different social groups (Wittmayer et al., 2017).

The social roles theory

The transition to adulthood is distinguished in the modern society by a prolonged character and higher quality of individualization, which makes it more precarious and uncertain than for the previous cohorts. This aspect has consequences for the socio-economic, family or health achievements of adults. With the prolongation of the transition to adulthood, there is a diversification and individualization in the roles acquisition. Youth alternate or combine education with work while entering or leaving marital or cohabitation arrangements. These transitions can also be accompanied by a temporary return to the parental home after the independent residence was initially won. With this increasing variability during the transition to adulthood, some authors question whether the patterns and classical pathways that marked adulthood can be considered accurate in the in the current context (Eliason, Mortimer & Vuolo, 2015).

The theory of social capital and social support

A contemporary transition theory of youth is the theory of social capital, showing that young people are not just the ones receiving social capital from their parents, but they are also a source of social capital in their peer group (Bourdieu, 1986; Coleman, 1990; Helve & Bynner, 2007; Putnam, 2000).

While social support theory focuses on family ties and other informal relationships, social capital theory pays attention to civic and institutional ties, supporting informal networks and important aspects of the social structures (Stone et al., 2003). Used together, the two theories allow an in-depth understanding of the broad spectrum of social relationships that young people establish, relationships that shape their identity, social roles and social functioning in the process of transition from care to independent living.

Identity theories

The transition of young people is no longer conceptualized as a stage leap but as a processual evolution. Regardless of classical or modern transition approach, the identity theories occupy a central place in studying and understanding the transition to adulthood, that is why we have given them an extensive space in this thesis.

The youth, during this life period, question themselves about who they are, where they belong and about the meaning and significance of their own life. These identity questions may appear throughout life, but become more present in the context of the transition to independent living. One reason could be the cognitive skills specific to the stage of formal operations and the development of critical thinking. These skills allow individuals to imagine how their life will look like and ask questions about how they want their future to be; as well as to develop assumptions about possible future "identities" (Schwartz et al., 2012).

By the middle of the 20th century, individuals could develop their identity based on predefined roles - parent and employee. In the modern society, individuals are currently exploring multiple roles before entering the labor market or marriage (Cote, 2000; Cote & Levine, 2002; Schwartz et. al, 2012).

Systemic theory

Systemic theory deals with the problems, relationships, structures and interdependence of different parts of the system, with a comprehensive view of the phenomenon. For this reason, it is applicable in the study of the socio-professional insertion process of young people leaving the child protection system. We can see the process of transition and adaptation to independent living as a system or process of the system with its component parts: social workers, psychologists, foster parents (agents of change), young people (target systems), etc. The agents of change enable target systems (young people) to manage the requirements of independent living and provide them with support to manage the problems they face (Rasaili & Titus, 2007).

Child Protection System

Systemic thinking (the ability to consider a system as a whole, not every individual component) is useful in addressing child protection system as it allows the analysis, synthesis and understanding of the interconnections, interactions and the technical, social, temporal and multi-level interdependencies of this system. Systemic thinking is based on the assumption that a system involves more than the sum of its components and must therefore be studied in a holistic way (Behl & Ferreira, 2014, pp. 104-105).

The Systemic Perspective on Family and Child Welfare

As in the case of general systemic theory, the family system is approached as more than the sum of its parts (its members), having the ability to pursue certain goals and a logic of functioning. A feature that imparts a subtle difference to the family system over the systemic approach is focusing on areas (e.g., focusing on systemic variables such as power roles allocation, division of labor, interfamilial affective expression patterns, communication, etc.) and mechanisms for change (e.g. defining boundaries, reshaping family behavior, assigning tasks, solving problems, etc.) rather than changing the system (Ryan et al., 2005).

From a systemic perspective, the development of the individual and family co-evolves in the course of living and from one generation to the next (for example, relationships change, boundaries and roles are redefined). Situations of distress are those in which major transitions occur (the arrival of a child in the family, the loss of a family member, the transition of a teenager to independent living, etc.) A functional family system succeeds to make changes to its members and to the evolution of their relationships, without disturbing the fundamental continuity of the system (Brooks, 1996; Walsh, 2011).

Recently, in several developed countries, the systemic perspective has been implemented in the assessment of *foster*³ families and the well-being of children for whom placement has been established in these families, within the *Integrated children's system (ICS)*. This system, proposed and widely used in the United Kingdom as well as in European Union countries, includes the sets of essential characteristics in assessing the situation of foster children, but also in calibrating intervention or developing programs for them.

Theories on the parent-child/youth relationship

The Perspective of Parental Deprivation

Parental deprivation is an important topic, especially when it comes to children who benefit from a special protection measure. Children and young people who experienced early parental deprivation, being exposed to a climate of non-supportive social interaction, often fail to adapt to later life societal demands (Ghosh, 2016).

Several studies show that parental deprivation plays an important role in psychological functioning and social adaptation of young people by increasing the susceptibility to risk behaviors (e.g. substance abuse) and personality disorders (Grossmann et al., 2002; Jablonska & Lindberg, 2007; Sobrinho et al., 2012).

The attachment theory

In the identity development processes, starting with the age of adolescence, individuals need to become aware and organize their abilities, needs, interests and goals in a manner that can be expressed in a social context. Young people who grew in warmth offering families, characterized by stability and predictability, and an adequate responsiveness to their needs, are appropriately equipped for exploration and commitment in identity formation (Imtiaz &

³ Since "foster care" and "maternal assistance" are not perfectly equivalent terms, when we refer to studies from other countries, we will use the term foster, which when we refer to the protection measures in Romania - the term maternal assistance.

Naqvi, 2012). The parent's ability to be sensitive and empathic in the relationship to the youth remains important in the times of change or transition. The parent's ability to pursue a partnership aimed to pragmatic goals is crucial at this age, characterized by multiple changes and transitions (Moretti & Peled, 2004).

The present theoretical framework (transition, systemic and attachment theories) allows us to understand different processes and agencies involved in youth transition to independent living, providing us a context of interaction between all actors involved and the possibility of proposing recommendations or future lines of research and intervention, starting from a complex perspective on this issue.

CHAPTER 3

A SYSTEMIC APPROACH ON THE FOSTER YOUTH PREPARATION FOR INDEPENDENT LIVING⁴ (RESEARCH 1)

Based on the theoretical framework outlined by the transitional, systemic theories and the theories about the parent-youth relationship described in the second chapter and inspired by the dimensions of the ICS integrative system, we aimed to deeply explore the perspective of youth in care on the transition to independent living.

As the identity processes become salient during the major life transitions, we have explored various aspects of the young people's identity that generate effects or are influenced by the transition to independent living (e.g. vocational guidance, family and social links, leisure and risk behaviors).

The data collection method used was the sociological survey (based on interview and questionnaire). Quantitative data were collected using a 65-item questionnaire applied during a single meeting. The questionnaire was adapted based on the items included in various tools that investigated the transition of foster youths (e.g. Blome, 1996; Courtney et al., 2007; Courtney et al, 2001; Fratu et. al, 2006; Irizarry-Fonseca, 2011; Leigh et al., 2007; Mares, 2010; Osterling & Hines, 2006; Schwartz et al., 2005; Sheehy et al, 1999; Van Breda et al., 2012; Wattenberg et al., 2001) exploring relevant issues for:

- the identity of young people in foster care (educational and professional interests, leisure time interests, lifestyle, psychological vulnerability, risk behaviors, juvenile delinquency, family and social relationships, attachment and feelings of belonging);
- preparation process for independent living: practical skills of independent living (self-care, practical skills, etc.); attitudes and needs associated with preparation for the transition to independent living (e.g. social support sources with facilitating role, barriers, solutions).

Qualitative data were collected from 15 individual interviews and two focus groups. The interviews were conducted on the basis of an interview guide, including questions about the transition to independent living (facilitators, barriers, and solutions), personal and social identity and preparation for independent living, this time the major themes being investigated in more depth.

⁴ Certain data and sections in this chapter were presented at:

PEER National Conference - Projects of Children and Youth: Expression, Participation in Decisions and Social Action, Cluj-Napoca, 2016. Boldiș, I. (2016) Opportunities and obstacles of the participation of youth from the protection system to the organization of their free time. Oral presentation at the National Conference PEER - Projects of children and young people: expression, participation in decisions and social action. Cluj-Napoca, October, 2016

Interdisciplinary Doctoral Conference, Bucharest, 2015. Boldiș, I., Roth, M., (2015). Young people leaving care - identity and belonging. Poster presentation at Interdisciplinary Doctoral Conference (IIDC 2015), Bucharest, September, 2015

Student Scientific Research and Psychosocial Intervention in Contemporary Society, Cluj-Napoca, May 2014. Boldiș, I. (2014). Youth's Transition from Child Protection System to Independent Living. Educational and Professional Interests. Oral Presentation at the Student Scientific Conference Research and Psychosocial Intervention in Contemporary Society. Cluj-Napoca, May 2014

Conceptualizing the identity aspects of youth in the transition from care to independent living

Identity and purposes

The age range of 18 to 25 years is seen as an emerging stage of adult development and independence (Keniston, 1971, in Arnett, 2000). This living stage is associated with the exploration of roles and commitments specific to adulthood, it is the period in which proximal as well as distal goals, such as living goals, begin to emerge. Defining goals from the age of adolescence can be considered as an identity capital and as one of the major benefits associated with firm identity commitments (Hill et al., 2016, p.2).

A particularity of the emerging adulthood is the perception of the adult status - the perception of reaching this status being a predictor of an effective transition to adulthood (Hill et al., 2016).

In this part, we studied what life purposes guide the youth in care and what is their perception regarding the adult status.

Results and discussions

Based on the quantitative and qualitative collected data, the following are noted:

- the future goals of youth are intersected with their areas of interests, suggesting a commitment to these goals. Responses to the areas of interests questions (adapted from Yeager et al., 2012) allowed a few criteria to be identified: occupation, education, housing, friends, family, well-being, autonomy and hobbies. A more in-depth analysis of the qualitative data obtained during interviews reveals four categories, which are of great interest for the future: education (completion or continuation of studies), obtaining a job, housing and starting a family. Life goals are overall self-centered, with only a small percentage of respondents mentioning altruistic goals (beyond-self goals). Youth in foster care are predominantly focused on clear, pragmatic life goals.

Education and profession seem to be alternative but also interconnected in some cases, while between profession/occupation, housing, and family there seems to be a causal relation. More specifically, foster youth believe that the possibility of purchasing or renting a home and setting up a family are conditioned by having a job.

The results are similar for the respondents in residential care.

Starting from Arnett's theory (2000) we investigated the internalization of the adult status, in the group of foster youth. Respondents believe that the adult status involves a higher level of accountability but also of independence. Regarding the internalization of the adult status, the perceptions of young people in foster care do not meet a unitary criterion. Some of the respondents had already internalized the adult status (achieved identity); in other cases, there is the perception that they still have a few stages to pursue before becoming adults (exploration).

The transition to independent living implies the achievement of several goals of adult social life: finding a job, a home, and a partner (in order to start a family). For young people in foster care, however, in many cases, this transition occurs rapidly, and the sources of support and guidance in planning the future are significantly reduced. However, the

outcomes for young people in foster care, in the area of major interests and life goals, seem to be similar to the results of other studies on youth from the general population (Bosma, 1992; De Vogler & Ebersole, 1980; 1981; 1983; Showalter & Wagener, 2000).

Vocational identity⁵

This part of the research, analyzing the youth identity aspects is the core of the outlined identity profile. Concerning the educational and professional sphere, we have collected and analyzed multiple data because finding and maintaining a job to ensure residency and daily life expenses is an important premise for managing an independent living. Integration into the workplace as soon as the young people exit the child protection system is a protective factor for adapting to the requirements of independent living.

In Romania, education represents an opportunity to remain in care after the age of 18, so the youth can benefit from same social and instrumental support after this age. According to the literature (Pecora et al., 2006), the existence of support sources plays a positive role in youth transition to independent living and their subsequent socio-professional integration.

In this research, the objectives that guided us follow the educational and occupational goals of youth in foster care, and question if their underlying reasons are intrinsic or extrinsic. We have also investigated young people's perceptions regarding the factors that may influence the achievement of their goals. In essence, we have studied how the vocational identity of young people in foster care is outlined and to what professional purposes it is related to, as well as the motivation that accompanies these purposes.

Results and discussions

Regarding the educational and professional interests and purposes, data shows that about half of the respondents are interested in achieving secondary education (high school / professional school, post-secondary school), and a similar percentage are interested to achieve a higher level of education. However, a significantly higher percentage (two thirds) are looking for a job with secondary education requirements. Some of the respondents want to pursue higher education, but still they are oriented towards occupational areas that require secondary education. A criterion could be the accessibility, most of the respondents considering that the professions requiring average education are more accessible in the labor market, both in their country and in other countries. Given that the transition from the child protection system to independent living is convergent with the transition from education to work, the orientation to more accessible occupational domains can be related to the expectations of these youth regarding the rapid insertion in the labor market and the possibility of finding a job in a short time after leaving care.

Entrepreneurship and volunteering were mentioned in a very low percentage by foster youth (below 2%), compared to young people in the general population where entrepreneurial intentions and volunteering are more prevalent (from 8 to 23%).

⁵ Although some authors draw a distinction between occupational, vocational or professional identity, in this research, the mentioned terms will be interchangeable, designating the same concept: identity built in relation to work.

The motivation for professional purposes tends to be predominantly intrinsic, suggesting that young people in foster care may have achieved a high level of autonomy.

The social support offered by school and family tends to be perceived as important in pursuing and achieving professional goals; the support offered by the peer group (friends, colleagues) is rarely mentioned in the vocational context. As some youth do not keep in touch with their biological family, data suggests that the adult performing the parental role (the foster parent) can provide support and encouragement, just as a natural parent would do (Johnson, 2015). Supportive relationships with parents or other people with whom the youth establish relevant interactions is a facilitating factor in youth transition from education to work (Zimmer – Gembeck & Mortimer, 2006).

Comparing data of the two groups, they show a high degree of similarity in regards to the vocational objectives. One possible explanation could be the immersion in a systemic culture with similar values, promoting school and studies. Another explanation could be the fact that for all youth in the child protection system, education is mandatory in order to benefit from a protection measure after reaching the age of 18. The orientation of both groups of respondents towards occupations/professions with high accessibility on the labor market may be associated with the fact that, once they leave care, finding a job is an imperative to achieve the independent living goals for both youth in foster care and residential care services.

Social identity, leisure time and risk behaviors

Leisure time for emerging adults is an opportunity to explore and discover their identity. This period is critical for identifying and managing health issues, coping strategies or social relationships that will affect their well-being on the long run. The identity of the future adult is shaped by the reconciliation of internal factors such as values, goals or desires with external forces such as the peer group, family, or extended social environment (Hartman, 2015).

In this section of the research, we explored the leisure time activities specific to foster youth, the parameters that characterize their lifestyle and certain patterns of risk behaviors or juvenile delinquency that appear. This section also included the testing of several research assumptions to see if there is a link between some of the variables we studied.

Results and discussions

The collected data shows that:

- over 90 percent of youth in foster care prefer leisure activities with friends; while less than 10% of respondents prefer solitary leisure activities, according to questionnaire data. Analyzing the qualitative data (in the interviews), the activities mediated by friends seem to be mostly outdoor, while the solitary activities are mixed (both outdoor and indoor).

- youth report risk behaviors such as: 24.1% smoke, 14.8% have experienced illegal drug use at least once and 44.4% mentioned occasional alcohol consumption. They also report health behaviors: 74.1% mentioned the presence of sports activities in their lives.

- one quarter of respondents (25.5%) reported the presence of antisocial behaviors in their behavioral repertoire.

- there are differences between young people in foster care and the ones from residential care regarding age and leisure time spent with the foster parent/educator (Sig = 0,047<0,05), respectively with relatives from the biological family (Sig =0,001<0, 01). Mean square analysis suggests that younger-age individuals in the foster care system prefer leisure activities with the foster parent (the role of the adult is still salient in their lives) while higher-age subjects from the residential care start spending more leisure time with biological relatives. Being close to the time of leaving the child protection system is likely to increase their capacity to consolidate new relationships and sources of social support for the transition and post-transition period. On the other hand, the identity exploration underlying this age stage may be associated with the increasing interest in the family of origin (in the absence of an alternative family environment, as it is the case of youth in foster care).

- the psychological vulnerability appears to be influenced by the chronological age of the respondents and the age when they started to benefit from a special protection measure. Thus, there is a statistically significant relationship between respondents' age and anxiety tendencies (e.g. specific phobias, Sig.= 0.046 <0.05, high distress in the last 6 months, Sig. = 0.0 <0.05). The higher age seems to be associated with more anxiety markers and a higher level of distress over a 6-month period. This trend is also confirmed by qualitative data, with a similar proportion of foster youth reporting a higher level of distress and a more salient manifestation of anxiety tendencies as the time of leaving the child protection system approaches.

We observe a positive association between the age of entering the protection system and the tendency to experience a higher level of distress over a 6-month period (Sig.= 0.004 <0.01). Thus, the lower the age of entering care (foster care), the better stress management strategies are present. These data are similar to those of other studies showing that entering the protection system from an early age appears to have a protective role in stress management, and it is associated with a shorter exposure to unhealthy behaviors/abuse in the early childhood (Thornberry, Ireland & Smith, 2001) and the possibility of developing structured attachment strategies from a younger age.

- the tendency towards impulsivity registered among the young respondents is associated with a disturbance of other areas of functioning. Thus, binge alcohol consumption is associated with other risk behaviors (tobacco consumption Sig.= 0.002 <0.01, drug use Sig.=0.001 <0.01 and juvenile delinquency Sig.=0.002 <0.01) while impulsive food consumption appears to be associated with major school-related difficulties (Sig. = 0.049 <0.05).

The tendency towards multi-impulse behavior patterns seems to be supported by other recent studies. Newkirk (2016) shows that impulsivity is involved in various problematic behaviors such as excessive consumption of alcohol, food, drugs or even suicidal behaviors - the tendency towards poor self-regulation or loss of control being present in several areas of functioning. For young people in residential care, we obtained data in accordance with Newkirk's study (2016), finding a link between drug use and suicidal thoughts (Sig.= 0.027 <0.05), as well as between sleep disturbance and juvenile delinquency (Sig.=0.031 <0.05).

Cultural and ethnic identity

Studies on ethnicity in adolescents and emerging adults show that the specific transitions of this age stage represent a significant incentive to explore and evaluate ethnicity (French et al., 2006).

In this section, we have explored whether youth perceive ethnicity, culture and religion as important identity aspects and if they are exposed to ethnic or social discrimination (the fact that they benefit from a special protection measure) and what strategies they apply to manage discrimination situations.

Results and discussions

The data collected from youth in foster care belonging to ethnic minority group suggests that they do not discuss and/or identify discrimination (even when exposed to it), that may in some cases lead to the augmentation of its long-term negative effects (Letendre, 2016).

Another situation is when young people in foster care identify with a majority ethnic group but are not accepted as such by the members of the dominant cultural group - a situation that they must learn to manage effectively for good individual and social functioning (Schwartz et al., 2012).

The main cognitive coping mechanisms (David, 2006, p. 93) observed in the case of foster youth were defensive denial, identification and compensation. The data on ethnic identity are insufficient to make rigorous conclusions. Although the responses and reactions to issues related to ethnicity or exposure to discrimination have been diverse and elusive, the issue of discrimination appears in other sections of the research, being subtly revealed in sections of the questionnaire or interview that have not directly explored this aspect.

Social identity in the context of relationships with the biological and foster families

The configuration of the child protection system and the alternatives it involves compel us to assess various aspects of the identity in the context of both social and biological ties (Beck & Beck-Gernsheim, 2002), because studies suggest that for young people in care there is a combination of both social and biological ties in defining one's own identity and sense of belonging (Angel, 2014).

This study aimed to explore the subjective perspective of young people on their identity in relation to the natural and foster family, the attachment bonds and the sense of belonging.

Results and discussions

Data suggests that:

- there are differences between the foster care youth and the residential care ones in terms of maintaining relationships with the biological family (65% of the young people in the residential system, compared to only 43% of the youth in the foster care system). Stronger ties with biological parents in the case of residential care respondents could suggest that placement in a residential service may be associated with a greater sense of belonging to the biological family. On the other hand, in the case of biological parents, there might be the perception that young people or children in foster care receive better protection services than

those in residential care - and this motivates them to stay more often in touch with youth in residential services.

- regarding identity in a family context (biological and foster family), we observe mixed responses, qualitative data suggesting that young people in foster care are still experiencing confusion about this identity issue.

- most of the youth in foster care that participated in this study (96%) reported that they feel at home in the family where they live. Interview data suggests strong feelings of belonging to the foster family.

- for young people in foster care, the closest relationship is established in the majority of cases with the foster parent, with 75% of respondents reporting this. There are also significant relationships with the social worker (17%), friends (14%), schoolmaster (12%) or biological brothers (7%).

Although we expected to have a significant relationship between the age that young people entered the child protection system and the attachment relationship with the foster parent, statistical data processing did not support this (Sig = 0.225 > 0.05). There are probably other variables that produce a stronger effect on the youth-caregiver attachment, such as the foster carer's parenting style or the pre-requisites that the child entered the protection system with.

- in strengthening the sense of belonging to the social environment where youth live, the relationships with the community seems to play a salient role, 96.3% of the young people in foster care show an association between the positive relationships with the community and the feeling of belonging to the environment where they live.

The transition to independent living - foster youth perception on this process⁶

Research shows that young people in foster care are often inadequately trained for independent living, experiencing high unemployment rates, school dropout, lack of housing or early parenthood (Van Ryzin et al., 2011). Among the disruptive factors that contribute to these negative outcomes are: the stress associated with transition, separation from the foster family and leaving the system that sometimes coincides with loss of ties with the community, friends, or even the biological family, as well as poor training for living independently (Van Ryzin et al., 2011).

Following Manso's study (2012) approach, we pursued an in-depth understanding of the foster youth needs, in the context of the independent living preparation/training.

⁶ Certain data and sections of this subchapter were presented at the Children's Safety Conference first. Protection against Violence, Cluj-Napoca, 2014, in Roth, M., Boldiș, I. (2014). The perception of young people in the protection system on the transition to independent living. Oral presentation at the Children's Safety Conference first. Protection against Violence, Cluj-Napoca, December 2014.

Results and discussions

Based on data from questionnaire and interviews, the results suggest:

- a positive perception of the independent living skills. The foster carer seems to be the main source for providing and modeling knowledge and skills in this area.

- different opinions on the emotional preparation for the challenges of transition. Most respondents showed a reluctant attitude, worries or uncertainty about leaving care.

- the main areas where youth in foster care think they need family and organizational support are: support for further education, support for career choice and finding a job and training for independent living.

The results are relatively similar for the respondents in the residential care, but they also emphasize the need for support in finding a home and planning the transition from the child protection system to independent living.

- in regards to the protection services provided to them, the youth in foster care described, in particular, the poor aspects perceived during the protection measure: lack of biological family ties, limited autonomy, placement in the same family with very young children, staff fluctuation and insufficiently reinforced relationship with the social worker.

- the difficulties/transitional barriers encountered by youth leaving care are in the opinion of respondents: lack of natural family relationships, misunderstandings with foster parents, school drop-out, difficulty in finding a job to pay for a rent and daily expenses, discrimination.

- among the main solutions they provide: the continuity of the support provided by the child protection system until achieving a stable/reasonable independent living situation; support from the biological or foster family; planning the transition according to the needs of each young person, based on the collaboration of the child protection multidisciplinary team; providing emotional and material support to both young people and foster parents in order to progressively accomplish the transition to independent living; mentoring services for young people; combating discrimination and a more active participation of young people in the planning of their own future, but also mutual support and greater visibility at the social level.

The residential care respondents' answers are centered around the same categories.

CHAPTER 4

THE FOSTER PARENTS' PERCEPTIONS REGARDING YOUTH TRANSITION TO INDEPENDENT LIVING (RESEARCH 2)

Based on the systemic theory and the theories regarding parent-youth relationship, outlined in the second chapter of the thesis, we made an assessment of certain aspects of parenting that facilitate the independence and socialization of young people. In the second part of this study, we explored the perception of the foster parents on youth preparation/training for independent living and their role in this process.

The literature is relatively limited on this topic, so, in this study, we followed the guidance of other authors who carried out studies on foster parents' perceptions, attitudes or beliefs, following the methodological steps they implemented (Rosa, 2013; Tronchim, 2006).

Design, tools and data processing

The main data collection method was the sociological survey (based on interview and questionnaire). We used standardized instruments, validated on the Romanian population, or tools adapted by the questionnaires relevant to the issues we studied (e.g. *The Self-Efficacy Scale*, Schwarzer & Jerusalem, 1999; *McMaster Family Assessment Device*, Epstein, Baldwin, & Bishop, 1983; *The Adult Attachment Scale*, Collins & Read, 1990; *The Personal Belief Questionnaire*, Berger & Kassinove, 1981; *The Coping Questionnaire*, Carver, Scheiner & Weintraub, 1989; *The Parenting Scale*, Arnold, O'Leary, Wolff, and Acker, 1993).

Individual and group interviews were conducted on the basis of an open semi-structured interview approach that included questions about: personal and family functioning of foster parents, relationship with youth in care, preparation of young people for independent living, solutions to make the preparation and the transition to independent living more effective, etc. An interview guide was used in every case.

Foster care services. Features, functioning and relationships within the family system⁷

Parents represent the primary socialization agent for children, both in a cultural and socio-economic context. Parental support is crucial in all life areas, especially when the child/young person crosses major life transitions. Support, guidance, parental encouragement are crucial to the success and the opportunity of a child/young person to an open future (Harden et al., 2008; Irizzary-Fonseca, 2011).

⁷ Certain sections of this study were included in Boldiș, I. (2013). Improving Foster Care. Strategies, Barriers and Challenges. *Today's children are parents of tomorrow. An Interdisciplinary Journal. Social Work and Child Welfare* Vol. 36 / December 2013, pp.55-66 and in Boldiș, I. (2013). Foster care for treatment - a viable alternative to child protection services in Romania. Annual Scientific Session of the Social-Human Research Department, Romanian Academy - Cluj-Napoca Branch, "George Barițiu" History Institute. Paper published in conference volume.

In this research, we explored how foster families work, what are the strengths and weaknesses of the family system that impact the relationship with young people in care and their transition to independent living.

Results and discussions

We will briefly summarize the quantitative and qualitative data obtained in each investigated field:

- the functioning of the foster care families is similar to the typical/general population register, in many areas: problem solving (M=1.43, clinical cutoff ≥ 2.20), communication (M= 1.92, clinical cutoff ≥ 2.20), roles (M=2.23; clinical cutoff ≥ 2.30); affective responsiveness (M=2.01; clinical cutoff ≥ 2.20); affective involvement (M=2.32; clinical cutoff ≥ 2.10), behavioral control (M=2.18; clinical cutoff ≥ 1.90), general functioning (M=1.65; clinical cutoff ≥ 2.00). The areas where a slight vulnerability is recorded are affective involvement and behavioral control.

- the parenting style tends towards verbosity (M=4.3; clinical cutoff = 3.4) and laxness (M= 3, clinical cutoff = 2.8), parental over-reactivity (M=2.6, clinical cutoff = 3) being less represented. Usually, parents who apply a parenting style focused on verbosity tend to rely on repetitive verbal instructions and less on a structure based on clear rules and limits.

- quantitative data suggest that the secure attachment style prevails (secure M=16.36, avoidant M=12.66, anxious M=10.32) and that the behavioral patterns of expressing warmth are appropriate to the youth in care age: satisfying some desires; gestures of warmth; spending quality time together and providing emotional support.

- the main coping strategies that the foster parents participating in this study tend to apply are: planning, active coping, positive reinterpretation, asking for instrumental social support, and religion-oriented strategies (both problem-focused and emotion-focused coping strategies). Some of the foster parents have tried to teach similar strategies to youth in care, while others have provided different (rather avoidant) strategies.

- regarding the parental beliefs system, questionnaire data suggest both average and effective parental practices in this area. Respondents seem to have confidence in their parenting skills and a positive perception of their parenting performance. These aspects are generally associated with effective parenting practices and a functional parent-youth relationship (Rubin & Chung, 2006).

Data shows a correlation between rational personal beliefs and self-efficacy ($r = .381$, $p < 0.01$). If the parent makes rational self evaluations, this is reflected in the efficacy of his/her parental interventions. Having effective parental interventions that produce positive results, the individual's confidence in his/her own ability to solve parental tasks increases (the beliefs of self-efficacy).

The data suggest that the higher the responding age, the more effective the family functioning is ($r = .291$, $p < 0.01$). This association could be explained by the fact that, as people age, individuals expand and assimilate certain roles within the family (e.g. husband, parent, grandfather) and this positively contributes to the family system functioning (Peterson & Green, 2009).

The foster parent's role in the process of preparing youth in care for independent living

The young people's relationships with significant others in their lives exerts a salient effect on various life transitions. The emotional or instrumental support offered in the relationships can contribute to young people's sense of security, trust and their propensity to explore the existing possibilities and major life decisions (Crawford, 2014).

Foster carers can provide important data on policies and programs aimed to support the transition of youth from the child protection system to independent living, as well as on the adherence of youth to the training services these programs offer. As active participants in the systemic processes underlying the preparation for independent living, foster parents can provide relevant and realistic feedback on the effectiveness of existing programs and systemic functioning at this level.

Based on the theories and studies presented in the thesis, we studied to what extent foster care services address to the needs of young people in care, mainly the need for training and support for the transition to independent living.

Results and discussions

The collected data suggest the following:

- an average accessibility to resources could help young people in educational and professional functioning (almost two-thirds of young people have access to the Internet, and more than half of them have access to a library located in the area where they live or study). The most vulnerable aspect appears to be the access to a vocational counselor at school or in the community (11.8%).

- in terms of career planning, in the foster parents' opinion, young people have a higher level of knowledge and skills on general issues, and a lower level - about the pragmatic aspects as: steps to be taken for a certain career, identification of organizations, companies where they could be employed.

- according to caregivers' opinion, young people in foster care have the following identity characteristics (related to the vocational field): exploration behaviors are present; they have defined career interests, have the necessary knowledge of their own abilities, and know some pragmatic aspects about the desired occupational/professional career. The area that is still developing is the one of commitments: only about one-third of young people, in the view of foster parents, have established clear steps to follow in the pursuit of their vocational goals or would continue to fight for those purposes even in difficult conditions.

There seem to be no unanimously agreed strategy to approach vocational training; some foster parents focus on the continuation of education, while others - on career planning and finding a job.

- regarding the practical skills young people need for a transition to independent living, the data suggest that the preparation programs work effectively on health skills (diet, hygiene, sexual life) and self-care. Areas with slightly lower percentages seem to be those related to getting a job, searching for housing, accessing certain public services (city hall, labor agencies, family doctor) and those related to money management.

- about the sources of support that youth need in the transition to independent living, respondents have given similar importance both to organizational support sources (state institutions and organizations) and to emotional support sources (the foster family).

- the main categories of difficulties faced by young people in the transition to independent living tend to be, in carers opinion, the poor rates of employment and housing, followed by the lack of support from other adults. Other barriers that occur both during the transition process and during the post-transition period are: frequent placement disruptions; friends and family interferences (in some cases, when they encourage discordant behaviors/commitments with the best interest of youth); systemic barriers and the large number of actors involved both in training and the transition.

- regarding foster care services, the main advantages mentioned by the respondents include: the opportunity for children/youth to benefit from exposure to a family model and to parental warmth, parent-child education and favorable environmental conditions, etc. The disadvantages described by the respondents reveal the lack of opportunities (to grow within the natural family, to benefit from non-discriminatory social relationships and a continuum of social and attachment relationships after exiting care, to have full access to the necessary resources for effective social and professional inclusion).

- the solutions that the foster parents have proposed both to optimize the protection system strategies in general and the transition of youth to independent living in particular include a gradual transition, a more coherent systemic discourse and the continuation of protection services with monitoring and support services until the youth gains full capacity to function independently, according to the requirements and norms of the social environment.

CHAPTER 5

FINAL CONSIDERATIONS

Conclusions of the research with youth in care

Looking at the data presented in each section of this research, we can observe the complexity of the identity profile of young people in foster care. The results indicate that young people in foster care are defined by a diversity of characteristics and this diversity should be considered as a reference when we want to characterize them as a group. In some areas, they have higher identity levels of achievement, in others - the achieved identity is poorly represented.

In the vocational field, clear educational and professional goals are defined. In the short term, they tend to focus on professions with secondary education requirements, accessibility to the labor market being an important criterion for professional guidance.

With respect to the lifestyle and leisure time, both risk behaviors and tendencies towards deviance are found. The positive aspect is that health-related behaviors are also present.

Regarding the social relationships, data reveal the close connection to the foster carer and his/her family, the attachment bonds and the feeling of belonging being most often defined in this context. The social network also includes members of the biological family (parents, brothers) as well as child protection specialists, but mainly the peer group. All types of social support seem to be valued by young people: emotional and instrumental support, the foster carer seems to be a prominent figure both for providing emotional comfort and for providing guidance or support in reaching life purposes; and organizational support, child protection specialists having a role both in pursuing life goals and in mediating the relationship with the natural family. The peer group seems to play a central role in leisure time activities.

Regarding the preparation for the transition to independent living, a percent of youth seem well-trained for the transition (in order to cope with the adult roles and responsibilities) supported by a coherent identity base and focused on clear commitments; while other youths require additional support for the transition to adulthood (Arnett, 2000; Schwartz et al., 2000).

In order to see whether there are significant differences between foster care and residential care, some comparative analyzes have been carried out with data collected from young people in residential care. Several differences have been reported, described and detailed within each specific part of the study, but overall we can say that there are no strong differences regarding the identity profile of the young people we studied. One reason for the lack of major differences between the two types of care on the identity of youth we studied could be the fact that foster care is relatively recent in Romania. A large percent of the young people in foster care included in the study spent the first years after entering the child protection system in residential care (they only later benefited from family care - foster care), so in some cases the effects of the two forms of care are mixed, making it difficult to make a clear disjunction of them.

This aspect could also be related to the training/preparation provided to foster parents with an emphasis on solving pragmatic problems in relation to youth in care and less on emotional issues - but this can be compensated by offering specialized psychological or social counseling and assistance services, besides the preparation for the independent living provided by foster parents.

The youth transition to independent living could be facilitated by providing training and support on completing education, finding a job and housing, but mainly by facilitating social support. The need for social support both when leaving the system and after starting independent living was a recurring theme in the discourse of young individuals in foster care.

As for the barriers they encounter in this stage of life, systemic barriers include the high load of cases for case managers, the poor preparation for independent living, as well as the low visibility and impact of their participation in the transition process.

The solutions provided by young people aim the continuity of services designed to support them in the educational, occupational or housing field for at least a few months after leaving the system, the continuity of the social support received from the foster family, the provision of counseling and mentoring services, and a more active participation of youth in independent living planning, both at the individual level and on a broad level (youth organizations).

Conclusions of the research with foster carers

In the first section of the research, we explored aspects of the foster parent-youth relationship that have a role in both mediating and moderating the effects of the relationship on youth in care.

Based on the data, there are no remarkable problems (of clinical intensity) in the foster families functioning. There are both strong points and vulnerabilities, based on which we can draw some conclusions:

- problem-solving strategies are structured, proactive, focused on immediate problem solving.

- coping strategies are mixed, foster carers seem to have a diverse repertoire of strategies - both to solve practical problems and to solve negative emotions within and outside the family system. However, in some cases, addressing the emotional problems of young people in foster care suggests the existence of parental difficulties in processing certain negative emotions in the relationship.

- communication seems effective within the family system, with messages flowing easily between family members. Several longitudinal studies have shown that a high level of bidirectional communication and acceptance in the parent-child relationship are positively correlated with the development of psychosocial maturity (Collins & Laursen, 2004).

- roles within the family system are disproportionately taken by the foster parent. Young people seem to be involved in various daily activities as active members of the family system. In the decision-making processes, power is polarized within the family system to the foster carer and his/her spouse - possibly as a reminiscence of the traditional family model,

but also as a variable associated with assuming professional responsibility for the youth in care.

- the ability of foster families to facilitate the development of structured and stable attachment relationships with young people in care is revealed. The safety and warmth received in the relationship with parents are associated with a higher level of self-confidence, identity exploration and comfort in social relationships in general (Jackson et al., 1998).

- in the field of behavioral control within the family system, certain limits are noted, such as parental practices with a tendency towards verbosity. These practices are not effective in dealing with young people, where the parent interventions need to be flexible and clear. However, data on the functioning of the family system do not suggest a major disruption to family life. The trend towards this type of practices might be also specific to the cultural context, being more socially accepted both within the families in the general population and those in the foster care program.

- functional parental beliefs correlate with a high level of self-efficacy, being a protective factor in the relationship with young people in care. Young people who are exposed to a rational parenting have greater chances to successfully adapt to the requirements of independent living.

The effective functioning of foster care families is correlated with the higher age of foster parents. The amount of time spent in the profession, associated with the acquisition of a higher level of knowledge and skills is probably a key variable in getting these positive consequences. On the other hand, the selection of foster carers is based on parental efficacy criteria (e.g. effective parenting skills). These *a priori* parental qualities, due to professional experience in foster care, seem to facilitate the implementation of appropriate care services.

According to the results, there are also areas that require optimization and training. To this end, the organizational support offered to foster parents could be increased by regular contact with the case specialists, teamwork, training and counseling for both the foster carer and his/her family, respiro periods for the foster carers etc. (Triseliotis, Borland & Hill, 2000, in Boldiș et al., 2012)

In the second section of this research, we investigated the perspective of the caregivers on the preparation of youth transition to independent living. Participants included in this study consider that:

- the youth training for independent living functions rather well, but it is necessary to optimize certain areas of vocational training and to support the preparation for social and cultural aspects. Other studies have presented similar outcomes (Ellis, 2004) showing that foster parents are usually satisfied with the youth training for independent living and the services that exist in this area.

- most foster parents are actively involved in preparing young people for independent living, including in setting goals or making educational/career decisions, however their training in this area needs to be sustained by the intervention of specialists and services for vocational orientation.

- respondents seem interested in providing emotional and instrumental support for youth after exiting care (problem solving guidance, accommodation until finding a home, etc.). On the long run, this would require institutional and systemic validation and regulation.

- the main difficulties faced by young people are finding a job, housing and the lack of support from other adults.

- solutions must come from several sources. According to the participants in this study, a conjugation of the foster parents efforts with those of the state and other relevant actors could lead to a successful adaptation of these young people to the requirements of independent living.

The data suggest that foster parents and their spouses have a predominantly positive perception of young people's training for independent living, but consider that systemic barriers - such as youth housing and employment policies or support programs (e.g. training programs, mentoring) for young people - have a negative impact on the independent functioning of young people after leaving the child protection system.

The data suggests the need for organizations, agencies and institutions that can play an active role in the socio-professional insertion of youth to develop a solid partnership, in which youth participation is valued and according to which the decisions and initiatives that concern youth them are designed (e.g. partnership between child protection system, local authorities, labor agencies, private and non-governmental representatives and young people leaving care).

The data show both strengths in the functioning of foster care services and vulnerable points on which we made some recommendation.

Final recommendations and proposing a model for approaching the preparation for the transition to independent living

Starting with the data obtained from the young people and the foster parents studied in this thesis as well as from the wider perspective provided by the literature (e.g. Crawford, 2014; Daining & DePanfilis, 2007; Fauth et al., 2012; Hughes et al., 2008; Irizarry - Fonseca, 2011; Larimore, 2012; Mares, 2010; Okpych et al., 2015; Pinkerton & Rooney, 2014; Porumb, 2010; World Assembly of Youth, in press), in the last chapter of the thesis we made some recommendations that can support both youth and specialists working with young people in foster on the threshold of transition to independent living. Our recommendations specifically refer to young people in foster care because they were the target group of this work. However, many of the recommendations are applicable and generalizable to all young people in the protection system, regarding the transition to independent living.

The recommendations were guided by some basic principles. Some of these principles are also found in other studies that have approached the transition of young people to independent living (e.g., Mares, 2010).

a. Recommendations are youth-centered, largely based on the needs identified by young people.

b. The resources currently being invested in the training and the transitional services offered to these young people are limited, so the recommendations should also take into account the current socioeconomic context and the appropriate ways to address this social problem.

c. The needs of young people leaving the protection system are complex and should not be the responsibility or in the duty of a single institution. In order to properly address this social problem, there is a need for a collective inter-sectorial effort, involving public, private and philanthropic representatives.

d. The transition of youth from care to independent living should be re-evaluated in terms of changes of the transitional patterns for young people in the general population over the last years (e.g., the de-standardization of the transition to adulthood). Otherwise, the gap between the youth in care and those from general population will continue to deepen, and the disadvantages to increase.

Based on these principles, we outlined the idea of partnership - as a way to approach the transition of young people from foster care to independent living. We believe that a *model of partnership and collaboration between all actors involved* in the transition to independent living and in the process of socio-professional integration of youth leaving care could facilitate effective solutions tailored to the needs of these young people.

Our model is based on systemic theory and aims to address the youth leaving care as active partners in planning and supporting the transition to independent living. We believe that foster parents are also a key resource in generating effective solutions and initiatives in transition planning, services and programs.

The transition of youth from the child protection system to independent living involves multiple possibilities for a constructive growth of the potential of these young people - for example, national and local authorities as well as community development agencies can include young people leaving the protection system in urban or rural development programs and facilities; thus making their role in the society more visible.

According to our model, the initiatives, efforts and solutions for these young people need to be mutually reinforced both locally and nationally. Based on this model, we made a set of general and specific recommendations that are developed in the last chapter.

Research Contributions

The purpose of the thesis was to explore and describe the dynamics of the process of preparation and transition to independent living, for youth in foster care. Although the two studies have several limits, this thesis brings significant theoretically and practically contributions.

The first research brings its theoretical contribution to understanding the identity formation of young people in care and practical contribution to the development and implementation of effective programs to support and facilitate the process of preparation for the transition to independent living. Based on the collected data and the relevant information from the literature, we made recommendations in order to increase the ecological validity of the data.

Another major finding of this research is regarding the effects of foster care as compared to the residential care. Both residential care and foster care must be appreciated on a continuous basis, foster care responds better to certain needs (e.g. attachment), while residential services respond better to other needs (e.g. supervision).

Another major contribution of the research is the participation of young people in care and the focus on making their perceptions of this transition visible. Young people in the child protection system are a vulnerable group, often exposed to social marginalization. This makes them not to trust others and to deny the initiatives, solutions or support provided to them. In many situations when they were told that something would be done in their interest, they were actually forced to do something unpleasant (e.g. living away from the biological family, leaving the foster family and moving to another family or to a residential unit). This is one of the reasons why they refuse to collaborate in certain situations when they are told "something will be done for them or in their best interest." Therefore, instead of "doing things for them", it is important to do things "with them", to work with them in finding the optimal solutions for their future. For this, we considered it necessary to collect data directly from young people in order to have a clearer and deeper insight into their well-being, in the context of the social services they are offered. Their subjective perceptions provide important feedback on how protection services have worked for them, as well as a credible and legitimate view on the effectiveness of foster care services in preparing these young people.

The second research major contribution is addressing the foster care services from a multidisciplinary perspective (sociological, psychological and social assistance). The provided data allow the understanding of youth identity development within the family system in which they are immersed and the way foster care services work for them, this time from the perspective of the caregivers. Both quantitative and qualitative data allow the practical identification of the strengths of foster care services as well as the aspects that require optimization. The results of this study can thus have practical implications for working with foster parents and young people in foster care, and the vulnerability points presented may be the subject of future training programs.

The thesis also brings major contributions by providing a systemic approach of the transition of youth to independent living, with young people being seen as active partners in the process. The model proposed by us can be used to develop effective programs and policies for these young people.

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Appendix 1 - Interview guide for the focus group with foster youth (semi-structured)

What are your plans for the future, for the leaving care moment? What are your educational and professional choices for the future?

What do you think will be the most difficult step during this transition to independent living? What could help you to best manage this transition?

Do you know other youths who left the child protection system? How is their life now?

Describe the preparation for independent life that was provided to you by now. What do you think you already know and what else would you need to learn in order to successfully adjust to independent life?

If you think about yourself, whom are you more similar to, your biological family or your foster family? Who are you closest to? What has s/he done for you over the years? Do you think you will stay in touch after you leave the child protection system?

Ethnicity, religion and culture matter for some people. How important are they to you? Have you ever experienced any type of discrimination related to this topics of because you did not grow up with your parents?

If you think about other young people who are in the child protection system, what could have been done better for them? What could have been be done better for you?

What solutions or suggestions do you propose for youth leaving care, in order to facilitate their transitional process?

Appendix 2 - Interview guide for the focus group with foster carers (semi-structured)

What does the foster youth preparation for independent life include? How prepared are they when exiting care? What do you think could have been done better, differently, for them? How early should the preparation process begin?

What support sources do you think they need for an easier transition to independent living and a more successful socio-professional insertion after leaving care?

Do you know other youth who left the child protection system? What support did they receive and what difficulties did they encounter after exiting care? How is their life now?

What kind of preparation did you provide to youth in care? What did you focus on: education, career, skills, health, relationships?

Have you talked to the youth in care about their planning for the future? Are their plans realistic? What did you guide them to do?

How do the youths in care perceive their post-transitional life?

Who do they feel closer to, the biological family or your family? What support do they receive from the biological family? Would you be available to offer them support on the long run, after they exit care? What kind of support?

What solutions or suggestions do you propose for youth leaving care, in order to facilitate their transitional process?