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**RESILIENCE AND VULNERABILITY AMONG
YOUNG CARE-LEAVERS OF THE ROMANIAN
RESIDENTIAL CHILD CARE SERVICES**

PhD Thesis Abstract

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Young people leaving institutional care in Romania once they have reached adulthood make up a category of population whose vulnerability has been acknowledged both by the literature in the field, and the European and national social policies and legal framework. The information on their life path held by the local public authorities is fragmented due to systemic difficulties in collecting data and monitoring the development of young people post-placement. The research aims to identify and analyse the dynamics of protective and risk factors that facilitate or hinder the adaptation to social demands of young adults leaving the residential child protection system. The qualitative design used pursued the collection of data by interviewing three categories of subjects: young people out of care, professionals who work within the child protection system, respectively professionals providing social services after ending the protection measure, thus respecting the requirement of triangulation of sources. Data collected from the interviews were analysed using the thematic analysis method, with MAXQDA analysis software. The comparative analysis between the perspective of young people and that of the specialists concerning the protective factors facilitating resilience has highlighted some progress, but also gaps in the application of institutional legislative procedures within the DGASPC and OPA and allowed the formulation of certain recommendations applicable at individual, micro-, meso- and macro-systemic level, in order to achieve successful socio-professional integration of young people out of care.

Keywords: *young people out of care, resilience, protective factors, risk factors, vulnerability, socio-professional integration.*

Summary

The purpose of the research is the identification and analysis of the protective factors which have supported the young adults who are out of child care to adapt to the social requirements during institutionalization and after aging out. This does not mean that all young people exhibit a good social adaptability, and the people who exhibit resilience in certain aspects of life (professional, financial, housing status) can be exposed to increased risks in other aspects of life (interpersonal relations, self-esteem, personal valorization). For this reason, the work also deals with the issue of vulnerability the young people have after aging out. This study has started within the framework of the international research project the Faculty of Sociology and Social Assistance, BBU Cluj-Napoca between 2016-2018, on the topic of „Support to Adult Survivors of Child Abuse in Institutional Settings”. The purpose of the research was the issue of the abuse of children in institutions, specifically in

residential centers, from the point of view of those who went through these experiences. One has chosen as the main topic of this work the pursuit of the adaptation of the young people to social life, analyzing the dynamics of the risk factors and the protective ones, to highlight the resilience of the young people. In this work resilience has been defined as *the process born out of the interaction between the human person and the adverse living conditions, in the presence of the protective factors, a process which is conscious, desired and oriented towards a precise goal, which leads toward a positive adaptability/success.*

The research was based only on the young people out of care who lived in residential units because the specialized literature had documented the fact that they exhibit a higher degree of vulnerability and are poorer prepared for independent life than those who went through family type care (Nelson III et al. 2007; Neagu, 2017; Roth et al. 2019).

On the level of the local public authorities in Romania, there is no information regarding young people out of care, and their path in life after aging out because the monitoring of the people who leave the system is done only with their consent, which excludes, from the start, a significant percentage of the people in this situation. On the other hand, in the national specialized literature, there are few studies which follow the life paths and the degree of socio-professional integration of these young people (Porumb, 2010 b; Neagu, 2017; Boldiș, 2018; Toth & Mita, 2020) and even fewer are the studies focused on the resilience factors which facilitated their integration (Porumb, 2010 b, Bunea, 2019; Mureșan, 2019).

The first chapter of this work presents the situation of the young people who are aging out of the child protective system, in international and national context, information regarding their resilience, the vulnerabilities they present and certain aspects on the socio-professional integration which they have achieved.

The second chapter is destined for the legislative framework which regulates the protection of the children lacking parental care, and of the young people out of care, respectively. The information have been introduced in order to normatively frame the researched problem, and, also because the legal provisions may constitute a powerful resilience factor (on a meso- and macrosocial level) for the studied population.

The third chapter presents the scientific theories which support the research. The resilience of the young people with an institutional past was explained by means of the theory of the social capital regarding the relations from the different levels they are part of, viewed from the perspective of their capacity to empower the young people to manage efficiently the vulnerability they have. The contribution of the theories of attachment is studied from the perspective of the dynamics between the internal working models and capacity of reflection,

and, respectively, the influence of the latter in determining the resilience. Ecological systems theory offers the conceptual framework of understanding the studied population in the concrete living environment in which it lives and the transactions which take place between these systems, while social cognitive theory, via the concept of self-agency facilitates the deep understanding of triggering the resilience mechanisms. The relating of the employees of the protection system to the professional responsibilities and their negotiation with the view of promoting role competence and, implicitly, of the resilience of the beneficiaries, was explained by means of the social role theory. At the end of the chapter one has presented the conceptual framework of the research, defining the terms used in research, as they appear in the specialized literature and in the theories on which the research was founded.

Chapter four presents the research objectives and questions, the methodology employed in the research, offering information referring to the three categories of subjects included in the sample: young people who lived in the residential institutions of child protection in Romania, professionals who work in the public and private child protective system and, respectively, professionals who work in the social services meant for the young people out of care. One has presented the research instruments (interview guides used), the means of collecting data and analyzing the obtained results. Also presented are the deontological aspects involved in the making of this study.

Chapter five is meant for the results obtained from three categories of interviewed subjects. The last chapter presents the conclusions referring to the resilience factors in the case of the studied population, with references to the specialized literature and the theories used. The limits of the research have also been indicated. At the end of the work one has made a few recommendations for further research and, respectively, for improving the legal and methodological framework in the field of child protection.

Au fost de asemenea indicate limitele cercetării. La finalul lucrării am trasat recomandări de cercetare ulterioară și respectiv de îmbunătățire a cadrului legislativ și metodologic în domeniul protecției copilului.

Research on the national and international level regarding the young people aging out

The aging out of a child occurs at the age when the young man goes through one of the most important transitions, the one from adolescence to the so-called *emerging adulthood*.

To this transition also found in the young people who lived in families another one is added: the transition from the residential care to the autonomous life, where the person must ensure everything necessary for subsistence, housing and social functioning. The young people who aged out start the independent life more abruptly and having far less help at their disposal than those who come from families (Gallegos-Mejia, 2019; Frimpong-Manso, 2020). Due to the limited resources at their disposal, their path in life is a challenging one and requires constant and sustained efforts on their behalf (Anghel, 2011; Anderson, 2015; Smith et al. 2015; Campo & Commerford, 2016).

When we approach the success of the residential care and the transition to adulthood, one has to take into account a sum of factors, namely: the individual characteristics of these persons (abilities and vulnerabilities), the formal and informal social support network, the social services available at a the local level, elements of the protection system (beginning with the infrastructure, the personnel, specific work procedures, to strategies regarding child protection and normative regulations), the continuity of the protection after aging out by integrated support measures and the monitoring of the evolution of the young people.

Cameron et al. (2018) considers that a new approach to child protection is needed by changing the paradigm of abrupt aging out with that in which the support is gradually retreated for the young person who is moving on from the “dependence one has in the system” to the “socio-professional independence” on tends towards. This belief is shared by Samuels and Pryce (2008) who are of the opinion that the resilience and the autonomy of an assumed adult do not mean so much independence, because one does not live independent from the rest of the people, and suggesting, in turn, the term “interdependence” to explain resilience.

The concrete data the international specialized literature referring to the young people who are out of care is presenting are similar to the ones found in the national literature. This shows that the greater part of the young people do not feel ready for independent life, feel confusion and fear due to the lack of support the were confronted with in that moment (Hedenstrom, 2014; Dickens & Marx, 2014; Dan et al. 2016). Toth & Mita (2020) and Bălan (2021) show that most of the young people (67%) were out of care at the age between 18 and 19 years, although legislation permits their care in the system until maximum 26 years.

The training they benefited from until the moment they aged out proved insufficient to sustain a stable socio-professional integration (Vîlcu, 2015; Dan et al. 2016; Toth & Mita, 2020), context in which the young people express their desire to participate in informational meetings regarding the rights they posses, the professional training opportunities and specialized social services services (Dan et al. 2016).

The best represented level of education at the moment of the aging out are the general studies (Courtney & Dworsky, 2006; Maposa & Louw-Potgieter 2012; Van Breda & Dickens 2015). Those who succeed in being admitted to a high school or a faculty and finish their studies do that when they are supported from the outside by members of the family, the former care personnel, the work mates, the religious communities they are part of, or, if they postpone their aging out (Courtney & Dworsky, 2006; Smith et al. 2015; Toth & Mita, 2020; Elliott & Fitzgerald, 2021). The lack of stable housing is one of the greatest challenges (Goodkind et al. 2011; Curry & Abrams, 2015; Cameron et al. 2018). Institutionally speaking, one has noticed the implication of the local public authorities by offering a subsidy for paying rent (Bălan & Bădău, 2022). Neagu (2017) notices the fact that a part of the young people out of care are later found in the transit centers, while Boldiș (2018) explains the fact that despite the existence of normative provisions on obtaining a home and the access to a job,¹ the state succeeds but in a small measure in offering housing or jobs to young people who age out annually. Starting with these realities, one has noticed the need for improving the support services post-care (Bălan & Boldiș, 2021).

One of the notable highlighted aspects regarding the effect of institutionalization is represented by loneliness, isolation, the lack of a person should “care about them”, negativism, pessimism, anxiety, stress, depression and low self-esteem (Munson & Mc Millen, 2009; Cameron et al. 2018, Sulimani-Aidana & Melkman 2018; Harrison 2019; Miranda, 2019; Sulimani-Aidana, 2020).

Courtney & Dworsky (2006), Goodkind et al. (2011) state that a high percentage of the of the young people who are out of care are involved in selling drugs or had problems with the police due to criminal behavior, some of them being arrested. Jones (2013) and Anderson (2015) in turn, identify a large number of those who, after becoming independent, start using drugs, alcohol and are diagnosed with borderline.

Oelofsen (2015), Schofield, Larsson and Ward (2017) and Miranda (2019) speak about the stigmatization the young people feel due to their institutional past, cultural stereotypes they have to face and the fear that the others will use them. These discriminatory experiences prohibit the development of their identity and have a negative impact on their social integration, finding it difficult to keep stable relationships with other people.

Neagu (2017) and Roth et al. (2019) amply describe the abuses which happened in the care system, using the concept of institutional violence. The authors refer to the residential

¹ Law no. 76/2002 on the unemployment insurance system and the stimulation of the employment of the workforce, Law no. 152/1998 on the the establishment of the the National Agency for Housing, republished, with the subsequent modifications and additions.

care which proves to be characterized by: limited access to the environment exterior to the placement center, daily routine consisting of communal activities, not taking into account the individual approach, the distant attitude of the personnel towards the children, restricting children's autonomy, excessive punishment applied to children which, at the same time, had a humiliating character, imposing psychotropic medication as a disciplinary action, admitting them to psychiatric wards in a way which is unjustified medically.

Some of the best represented resilience factors in international research are the relationship with the adults and education. Very many authors (Stanton-Salazar & Spina, 2005; Bottrell, 2009; Collins, Spencer & Ward, 2010; Campo & Commerford, 2016; Blakeslee & Best, 2019; Doucet, 2020) approached the social networks from the perspective of their function of protective factor. These include the relations with the peer, neighbors, extended family, work mates, reference adults, professionals from various institutions, etc.

Education is studied, in turn, via the role it has in the success of the social integration of the young people who are aging out (Bunea, 2019; Brännström, Vinnerljung & Almquist, 2022).

The internal resilience is studied via the personal qualities which the persons possess: the realist perception of the future, intelligence, flexibility, high self-esteem, social activism, the feeling that they have control over their own lives (Losel & Bliesener, 1994), the capacity of these young people to see the difficulties they meet all over their lives as provocations and to adopt a constructive attitude which involves self-reflection, focusing on one's own capacities, on abilities and on the capacity to overcome difficulties (Gonzalez, 2015), the capacity to learn from the mistakes of others, the power to transform the negative events into learning experiences, faith in God and the projection of the future plans (Oelofsen, 2015). Other qualities found in resilient young people are: self-identity (Stein, 2008), the feeling of belonging, the inter-human support, the institutional support and the trust in one's own forces (Van Breda, 2013) the personal autonomy, understood as the "ability to act independently and to have control over the environment" (Hass, Allen & Amoah, 2014, p. 3), the ability to ask for help (Miranda, 2019).

With regards to the national literature, aspects concerning the resilience of the persons who are out of care are found in few national studies, like the ones written by Porumb (2010 b), Neagu (2017), Boldiș (2018), Bunea (2019) and Mureșan (2019).

National legal framework

In Romania, the number of children currently in the care of the special protection system is still high, despite the efforts done with a view of restructuring and reforming the

social policy addressed to children. ANPDCA² shows that in the end of the year 2022, there were 42,029 children in the care of the special protection system, of which 11,629 in residential centers and 30,400 in family care. Geographically speaking, most children with placement care are in the Northeast Region: 10,532, versus 3,498 children in the Southwest Region, for example.

As far as residential institutions are concerned, on the national level 1,308 institutions have been reported, of which 50 are classical centers, 1,097 family-type units, and the rest are maternal units, modulated or emergency reception units. One of the conditions for the accession of Romania to the European Union was the reform of the child protection system. It was planned to close down the 164 large institutions identified on the national level until 2020, however, taking into account the complexity of this endeavor and the costs which it incurs, the process is undergoing and, currently, from the figures given above one can see that there are still 50 large centers which still need closing/restructuring.

ANPDCA³ also offers information regarding the number of children who are in residential placement care by age group. Thus, at of 2022, 5,516 young people with the age between 14-17 years (47.4% of the total) and 1,888 young people with the age over 18 years were in institutions. From the analysis of these figures, one can estimate that, annually, approximately 2000 young people can age out, the tendency being also encouraged by the monthly financial support granted in the case when the protective measure ceases after reaching the age of 18 years, if the person chooses not to benefit from the protection until the maximum age of 26 years (Law no. 272/2004, art.129).

In response to the research recently done and published in this field, as well as to the sustained initiative coming from several forums which are active in the field of children's rights, a series of legislative measures regarding monitoring and supporting the young people who are aging out have been adopted, the most important ones being provided by Law no. 272/2004:

- monitoring the evolution of the young people after aging out for a period of 2 years by the Public Service of Social Assistance from the young person's home
- the obligation of DGASPC to support the young person in looking for a job and a place to stay before aging out
- residential services that are allowed to function are only those organised on a family model

² https://mmuncii.ro/j33/images/buletin_statistic/copil_2022.pdf accessed on 15/07/2023.

³ <https://copii.gov.ro/1/date-statistice-copii-si-adoptii/> accessed on 15/07/2023.

- the allowance granted to young people on aging out has risen from 1 to 3 minimum basic salaries countrywide guaranteed to be paid

- the allowance in the amount of 4,8 ISR granted monthly to the people who age out before reaching the age of 26 years if they are enrolled in a full-time institution of education or have a job was introduced.

The theoretical framework of the research

The relations the young people establish after aging out with the support persons, constitutes a resource recognized by the specialized literature (Goodkind et al. 2011; Jones, 2013; Blakeslee & Best, 2019; Frimpong-Manso, 2020; Jäggi et al. 2022; Shdaimah & Zhao, 2022), and this is the reason why one has chosen the theory of social capital to explain the protective role of social relations and of the connections within these networks.

From the theory of attachment one has used the concept *capacity for reflection* and its role in the construction of the resilience in the case of those who went through traumatic events / developed an insecure attachment. The theory of ecological systems moved the emphasis from the internal protective factors which pertain to personal (sometimes innate) abilities to external factors, more precisely on the transactions between the subject and the ecological systems one is part of. The Social Cognitive Theory (Human Agency Theory) contributed to the understanding of the researched topic by means of the acceptance of the concept of self-determination: a component of the agentic self which develops throughout life, including the following characteristic features: to learn to make choices and express preferences, to solve problems, to make decisions, to set up goals, to engage in intentional actions, to gain self-awareness. The perspective of the specialists on the researched topic is studied from the perspective of social role theory which implies adaptability – to cope with emergency or crisis situations, with uncertain, dynamic, changing situations, with workplace stress, to solve the problems creatively, to exhibit flexibility in interpersonal relations (Pulakos et al., 2000) and a professional proactive attitude (Crant, 2000).

Research methodology

In order to achieve the purpose of the research, four research objectives were set, each with its own specific questions which aid in reaching the objectives:

1. The identification of the resilience factors of the young children who are aging out.
 - a). *How do young people perceive their own evolution depending on their successes and adversities the dealt with?*

- b). *How does the capacity of reflection act in view of the traumatic events in life?*
- c). *Which are the social systems and subsystems which promote the resilience of the young people?*
- d). *Which value do the transactions within the social networks have in supporting the resilience of the young people?*
- e). *Which resilience factors do specialists attribute the success of the young people who are aging out?*
- f). *Which aspects in the interviews denote adversities and risks in the life of the young people who are out of care?*
- g). *To what extent do the results of the role performance of the specialists in the child protection system represent resilience factors for the young people who are aging out?*

2. Establishing a typology of the identified protective factors, relative to the classifications existing in the specialized literature.

a). *Which are the types of protective factors identified as a result of the conducted interviews?*

3. Offering a comparative perspective of the risk as well as the protective factors as resulting from the analysis of the data collected from the sample of young people, as well as from the specialists, respectively.

a). *Which are the major differences between the two perspectives?*

b). *Which explanations can be offered for these differences of perception?*

4. The formulation of some recommendation regarding the intervention in the field of child protection and in the field of young people protection which put the system behind, based on the initiation and the support of the resilience of the two categories of persons.

a). *Which recommendations do the young people / the specialists recommend for the support of the young people in care as well as of those out of care?*

b). *How can we frame these recommendations in the context of the sociological explanations offered by the theories used to formulate a set of professional and sustainable recommendations?*

Sampling

In order to encompass a large variety of young people, the first sample contains 50 young people who lived in the child protection system (22 girls and 28 boys), from 10 counties of Romania, the sampling method using the snowball technique (a non-probability method).

The second sample contains 45 specialists who carry out their activity in the framework of the public and private child protection system (14 DGASPC and 3 OPA). One has used the rational sampling method.

The third sample is made up of 6 professionals who provide social services to adult persons who are out of care. The technique used was rational sampling in this case as well.

For data collection one has used the semi-structured interview, the interview guides being conceived depending on the data one has tried to collect from the members of each sample. The interviews took place face to face, by telephone, while a part of the professionals decided to answer in writing. In order to respect the deontology of the research, the persons who took part in the research were informed about confidentiality compliance and filled in an information and consent form. The data collected as a result of the interviewing were analyzed using the thematic analysis method with the aid of the MAXQDA analysis program. Within this process, one used the coding technique, through which a series of concepts, themes and sub-themes relevant to the research topic which are going to be presented in the chapter for results were generated.

Findings

Resilience factors. Taking into account the classifications offered by the published literature (Stein, 2005; Yates & Grey, 2012; Andreson, 2015; Smith et al. 2015) as well as the analysis of the data collected throughout this research, the resilience factors have been structured as follows:

Internal resilience factors

- 1. Own resources** (the capacity of reflection and analysis, self-esteem and optimism, the choice of life models, practical mind, faith in God, the will to fight and endurance, conciliation)
- 2. Personal autonomy** (independent life skills, work and financial independence, implication in prosocial activities, the capacity to design future plans)

External resilience factors

- 3. Instrumental factors** (the implication of NGOs, education, hobbies, psychological therapy)
- 4. Institutional factors** (the residential care, the changes in the system)
- 5. Relational support** (the presence of siblings/friends in the system, dedicated employees, supportive teachers, professional foster care, representatives of foreign NGOs, “resource” adults, the newly founded family).

Results obtained following the analysis of the youth interviews

The analysis of the perspective of young people on the resilience factors that supported them both during the care period and after that, suggest that the internal protection factors are well represented in the messages of the young people in the sample, both regarding the diversity and density. As to the positive aspects characterising them, the respondents that have showed resilience stated that they are characterised by ambition, tough personality, the will to fight, to not give up, to overcome the condition of “child in care” and the ability to turn the life events into learning opportunities. Similar characteristics have been mentioned as shown in the conclusions reached by Samuels and Pryce (2008), Hass and col. (2014), Gonzalez (2015), Sulimani-Aidana and Melkman (2018), Medlin (2019).

The respondents have pertinently and profoundly analysed the child protection system managing to capture both the deficiencies and the functional aspects. Regarding the latter, the young people have shown that they appreciate mainly the opportunity of access to education, which would not have been possible if they had remained within their biological family. The dysfunctional aspects, such as the perpetuation of an abusive environment, the obvious disinterest in children, the poor conditions, the lack of any kind of stimulation, are analysed on their turn in a realistic manner and explanations are brought as regards why the employees have failed to adopt another conduct than the one they had. In the same time, the young people analyse their own conduct, they are aware of their vulnerabilities, but they fight to overcome them, some of them turning to external support such as counselling and psychological therapy programs, to local institutions or to persons they trust. For example, A.N. explains the judgement she used when she had to make choices about her own future: *„I thought I wouldn't want to end up like my parents, not knowing anything. I wanted to show that I can, that despite growing up in a residential home, I'm not 'handicapped', I don't steal, I'm not aggressive, I don't like being on the streets and being with people who don't suit me. I have to study, to read.”* (A.N. girl, 36 years old)

They show a spirit of conciliation both in relation to former employees who have behaved abusively towards them as well as regarding their natural parents who were unable to provide for their care for various reasons. They choose life models different to those observed in their own families or in the residential care where they lived, as highlighted by Sarubbi (2019). They show practicality, they surround themselves with resource persons, they identify community amenities, and choose to live in large cities that offer further opportunities. Van Breda, Marx and Kader (2012) identify this resource in the young people subject to study and call it “street smarts”.

Faith in God is perceived by young people as the inner resource they relied on in critical moments of life, as noted by other authors as well (Câmpean, Mihalache & Constantin, 2010; Goldstein, Faulkner & Wekerle, 2013; Dickens, 2016; Van Breda & Dickens, 2017; Bunea 2019).

Personal autonomy is found in the young people interviewed at the level of financial independence, of having a job, of the involvement in prosocial activities, of the ability to design future plans and of the independent life skills. A.Z. reports that she managed to complete her studies with the support of an NGO and is now working in the field of her studies, which gives her financial stability and personal satisfaction: „*I finished university, did a master's degree where I spent almost a year on a scholarship in Spain. Now I work as a bank clerk in one of the best banks in Romania.*” (A.Z. girl, 27 years old). Independent living skills are brought up with reference to the period of time spent in family-type units or after they have been transferred to foster care, as noted by Porumb (2010 a).

The powerful representation of the personal resilience factors within the interviews with the young people leads to the conclusion that they rely mainly on their own forces to succeed. The importance of these personal protective factors is confirmed by the specialized literature (Schofield, 2001; Schofield & Beek, 2009; Goldstein et al. 2013; Anderson, 2015).

The most impactful instrumental factor described by young people is education. This is valued because it made possible the access to a social network made up of people whom young people took as life models, for the social status offered and implicitly, for the financial stability, but also for broadening the informational and cultural horizon which helped them process the traumatic events they had gone through. A considerable amount of research approaches education as a resilience factor for socio-professional integration (Gilligan, 2007; Hass et al. 2014; Dickens, 2016; Rutman & Hubberstey 2016; Miranda, 2019; Medlin, 2019; Groinig & Sting, 2019; Gross, Stolzenberg & Williams, 2020; Bălan & Bădău, 2022; Brännström et al. 2022; Shpiegel, 2022).

The relational support is represented by the dedicated employees, the teachers who offered life models, the foster care professional, the reference adults who are their informal mentors and the peer group. A special place has the family life, the relationship with the spouse and with the child which offers them a strong sense of accomplishment.

Among the *risk factors* mentioned by almost all the young people in the sample, is leaving care without having been timely informed and without a proper preparation. This aspect, combined with the under-representation of post-foster care support services, placed the entire responsibility of survival in the first phase, and then of social integration, on the shoulders of young people. Similar realities are brought forth by McCoy, McMillen and

Spitznagel (2008), Hedenstrom (2014), Dixon et al. (2015) Toth and Mita (2020) and Bălan (2021).

Other risks relate to losing the employment, loneliness, roots lack, negative self-perception as “children in care” or “orphans”, irritability, impulsiveness, lack of control over nervous reactions, nervous tics, instinctive fear that someone might hurt them, flashbacks, depressive symptoms, lack of meaning in life, nightmares about events they went through in the past, and suicide attempts. As a result of the abuses he suffered in the residential care where he was institutionalised, V.L. comes to the conclusion that he could not overcome the traumatic experiences he was subjected to, despite the external support he received: *„I think that the past travels with me, it belongs to me, and I can't get rid of this pain from one day to the next, the anger I have inside me about my past. At least I don't know how it can be possible, I spoke to the psychologist, the psychiatrist, other specialists, the social worker, but it was not possible.”* (V.L. boy, 37 years old)

Similar conclusions are effects found as well in other authors such as: Munson and McMillen (2009), Goodkind et al. (2011), Yates and Grey, (2012), Dan et al. (2016), Cameron et al. (2018), Sulimani-Aidana and Melkman (2018), Harrison (2019), Miranda (2019), Roth et al. (2019), Sulimani-Aidana (2020). In relation to starting a family, the young people in the sample are divided into two categories, for some of them the family is a resource, and for others an area in which they feel unprepared.

The young people's *recommendations* for the improvement of the child protection system stand out for their practicality, the clarity of their formulations and their argumentation. The answers refer mainly to the human resource: the professional qualification of the employees, the selection criteria of the staff upon employment, the qualities required from the employees of the system, the need of continuous training and the importance of establishing an authentic and trustworthy relationship between them and the children in their care.

Results obtained following the analysis of the interviews with the specialists

The specialists participating to the research have offered information concerning the services provided to the young people in care and to those who left care (in their capacity of resources to be used by young people). The answers show that the programs run within DGASPC and OPA with a view to preparing young people for the adult life include a wide variety of activities. The activities for acquiring independent life skills are organized by activity areas, according to the age and maturity of young people and consist of: household activities, personal hygiene, managing money, home management skills, accessing community resources, social development, vocational and professional guidance, the use of

banking services, free time management. As to keeping in touch with young people after they leave care, this aspect has been included among the questions addressed to the professionals because it has been considered a potential resilience factor for those leaving care. Most of the answers were affirmative, the cases in which the employees didn't stay in touch with the beneficiaries being very few. Most of the times, the relationship is maintained through telephone, messages, social networks, but also through visits to the institution seat.

The protective factors identified by the professionals refer to: financial support provided after leaving care, the services provided by the public and private institutions, the monitoring, psychological counselling and the social network. As can be noted, the specialists hardly notice the internal factors of resilience in young people. The internal resources are tangentially mentioned, their integrative role is not given much confidence, the only resource that seems to be an exception being the intellectual skills that facilitate access to academic studies.

Specialists almost unanimously agree that the beginning of independent life surprises young people in a state of high vulnerability due to their inadequate preparation and to the transition to independence that occurs far too suddenly: „*We note that young people have not developed daily life skills, personal care skills (personal hygiene, cleaning, cooking), money management, professional integration. Young people have developed certain «survival» techniques that are largely incompatible with the demands or expectations of society.*” (E. D. social worker, private social service, Cluj-Napoca). Most of the times, the responsibilities they must shoulder overnight exceed their capacities and resources, an observation supported by both national research and international literature (Anghel, 2011; Hedenstrom, 2014; Vîlcu, 2015; Oelofsen 2015; Dan et al. 2016; Harrison 2019; Toth & Mita, 2020; Gill et al. 2020; Bălan & Bădău, 2022).

The professionals place the external risk factors at the level of the negative influence entourage that the young people who leave care choose because they are very naïve. They lack a trustworthy social network because this has not been established during the time they were still within the institution. Concerning this aspect, Goodkind (Goodkind et al. 2011) estimates that the lack of relational support constitutes the greatest challenge after leaving care. The prejudices of civil society are another almost omnipresent obstacle that hinders their access to the labour market and predisposes them to social exclusion. Specialists report events in which employers discriminate young people coming from the system: „*But here we have a mentality problem that the main guilty party of service in a collective is the child from the system. The same goes for schools. When something was stolen, it was our children in the*

centre. They are fighting with some mentalities and they have to prove that this is not the case.” (P.M. head of service, DGASPC Călărași)

The stigma and cultural stereotypes brought up by the sample of professionals are also associated with risk factors in the research performed by Câmpean et al. (2010), Turpel-Lafond (2014), Oelofsen (2015), Dixon and col. (2015), Schofield et al. (2017), Neagu (2017), Miranda (2019), Moyer and Goldberg (2020).

The lack of stable housing, as well as of the prospect of ever having one, makes them even more vulnerable and constitutes an emotional distress for them, as noted also by Maposa (2010), Goodkind, Schelbe and Shook (2011), Maposa and Louw-Potgieter (2012), Turpel-Lafond (2014), Curry and Abrams (2015), Anderson (2015), Cameron et al. (2018).

The biological parents are perceived as risk factors because they try to reconnect with their children when they learn they are a source of income, they take advantage of their financial resources, and then abandon them again, unlike the results achieved by Dinisman et al. (2013), Jones (2013), Blakeslee (2015), Pryce, Napolitano and Samuels (2017), Toth and Mita (2020), where the natural family offers housing/material support after leaving care.

The internal risk factors are identified at the level of distrust in institutions and professionals, especially psychologists, which is why they rarely turn to this type of support, only when they have no other option. Another major risk that is increasingly present in recent years is represented by substance addiction, mainly drugs, challenges facing which young people seem to lack almost any defence strategy.

The professionals in the sample estimate that many risks that young people are facing are nothing more than “legacies” of the system that provided care, starting from the failure to fulfil the emotional needs that leads to personal devaluation and behavioural problems, to the lack of concrete opportunities to exercise autonomy, various social roles and take responsibility for one's actions.

The majority of specialists brought up the restructuring that took place in recent years in residential care, namely the abolition of large centres and the granting of legal operating permission only to family-type units that accommodate a maximum of 12-16 children. In the field of internal management, It is recommended to reduce the number of documents that the care personnel and case managers must elaborate, in order for them to have more time to actually spend with the children. The employment of social parents and male staff in CTFs (*family-type houses*) as well as the financial support of the private sector are also considered important.

For the support of young people who already left care, most recommendations relate to free medical and counselling/psychological therapy services, financial support, facilities

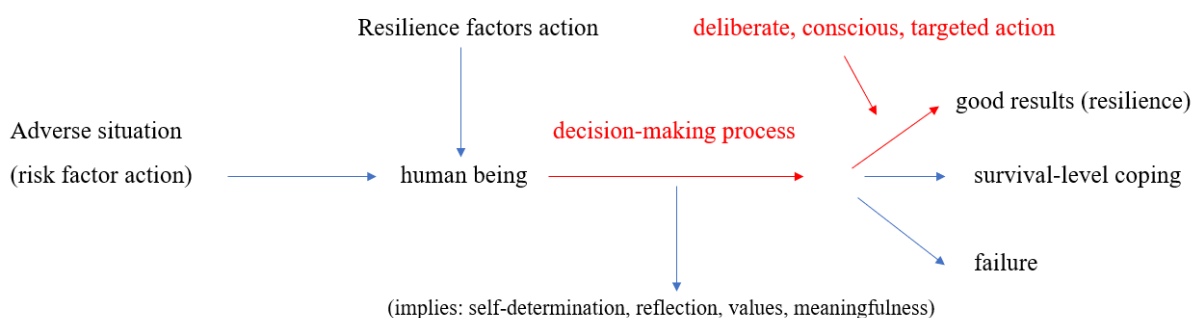
for obtaining housing, increasing the quality of the professional activity of employees in the child protection system and post-care monitoring.

Conclusions

Theoretical conclusions

In the study undertaken, the conceptual framework of the resilience theory has been applied to the issue of young people who left care. The main concepts used were: resilience, understood as the quality of „performing well despite exposure to adversity” (Masten & Coatsworth, 1998, p. 205) from which the two essential elements needed to discuss resilience are derived: exposure to adversity/negative events and the good outcomes/progress the human person achieves. Resilience is processual in nature, more specifically it occurs in the interaction between the human person and the environment in which they live (Masten, 1994), contextual, meaning that it varies from one life stage to another (Werner & Smith, 2019) and cultural in the sense that what in one environment is considered resilient, successful adaptation, in another context may be categorised as common, ordinary or even failure. Risk is a situation of adversity that „has a high potential to threaten a person’s healthy development” (Daniel, 2010, p. 232). Adversity encompasses negative life circumstances that are statistically associated with adjustment difficulties (Luthar & Cicchetti, 2000). Protective factors are those elements that support the person to overcome the problematic situation in a positive manner, balancing the effect of risk factors (Jessor, 1991).

Following the study, the conceptual framework of the resilience theory has been enlarged with a conceptual model applicable to the evaluation of the capacity of young people to face adversity as shown in the figure below.



Empirical conclusions

The analysis of the data collected within the research shows that the young people identify and insist mainly upon internal and relational protective factors, while professionals almost exclusively refer to external resilience factors. The powerful representation of the personal resilience factors within the interviews with the young people leads to the conclusion that they rely mainly on their own forces to succeed.

The specialists' perspective is very different from that of young people also due to their focus on a lot on hypothetical factors, on possible support, rather than on realities, on what young people already possess. A conclusions cannot be drawn as to whether this means for the employees that the young people dispose of only few resources or they simply desired to identify some new possible resilience factors and concrete ways of exploiting them on a large scale (at the level of procedures/legislation/strategies).

It is noted that young people do not perceive the efforts made by specialized staff in order to prepare them for independent life to the extent that these efforts are presented by professionals. Nor the specialists intervening after aging out or leaving care seem to notice tangible results of the intervention carried out during the care period. Despite the intensive training, carefully planned and carried out by the DGASPC and the OPA, aimed at ensuring an effective transition to living on their own, the mentioned specialists unequivocally state that young people do not have the minimum resources for an independent life. A possible answer is offered by the specialists who act after leaving care, according to whom, the system, in its attempt to protect these young people, did nothing but burden them with a lot of shortages in acquisitions. The second explanation consists of the fact that in acquiring independent life skills the young people are too little involved in practical activities, where they have specific and clearly defined roles and responsibilities. A third possible explanation is that professionals who provide services after leaving care only interact with those who need support, because young people who show evidence of good social adjustment do not need, do not ask for help. For this reason, the observation of the specialists that the young people do not possess the abilities necessary for an autonomous life, does not concern all the young people leaving care. Another explanation, complementary to the first three, resides in our opinion, in the lack of the evaluation of the efficiency of the programmes implemented by the DGASPC. The care institutions carry out extensive youth training programs, but nobody measures their efficiency because this approach can only be carried out after the passage of a period of time in which young people have the opportunity to put into practice what they have learned, a period over which DGASPC no longer has control because it does not have the attribution to monitor them.

The staff of the DGASPC and OPA mentions an activity which has been going on for a little while, but is starting to be more and more visible. It is about informing young people about their rights, the community resources they can access and the community facilities available to them. Closely related to this activity is the implication of young people in the decisions concerning them, so that the actions concerning them may be planned together. The young people of the sample do not mention anything concerning such information, on the contrary, many of them state that they had to leave care without having been asked for their approval and without being informed beforehand.

Regarding the relational support, the young people do not indicate staying in touch, nor the support received from the former case managers or care staff within the family-type houses, although the employees attach importance to this resource.

The mistrust in people and institutions of young people leaving care is in our view a real concern and at the same time a wake-up call for the legislator and social policy makers as it prevents access to community resources and services/benefits to which young people are entitled.

Recommendations

National research performed up to this moment (Anghel, 2011; Vîlcu, 2015; Dan et al. 2016; Toth & Mita, 2020; Bălan & Bădău, 2022) draw attention on the fact that the preparation of the young people during care has proved insufficient to promote a stable socio-professional integration. Downes (2019, p. 147) states that: “the system’s obligation is to enable teenagers to successfully negotiate the transition to adult life”. The research focused on resilience, rather than dysfunction, represented a turning point in addressing the subject of institutionalized children, identifying protective factors that facilitated good social adjustment following the aging out or leaving care.

In accordance with the results obtained and guided by the conceptual framework of the scientific theories underlying the research, we formulate the following recommendations for changes in social policies regarding the support of young people who care:

From the perspective of social capital theory:

a). Ensuring the predictability and continuity within the institutional care process, paying attention to the creation and development of trustworthy relationships between the assisted person and the care institution, respectively the stability of relationships with reference persons for young people.

- b). Familiarizing young people with accessing community resources even during the care period, so that at the end of care, they know both “where” and “how” various applications are filed.
- c). Enhancing the role of the Public Social Assistance Service regarding the provision of information/support/attendance to young people in accessing the the community resources.
- d). The support of the organisations/institutions acting for the benefit of the population subject to study, as well as of the partnerships for the establishment of a network facilitating collective actions.
- e). Supporting and strengthening the relationships between young people and their reference persons - starting from the period they are still in care, a relationship that will continue after leaving care.
- f). The implication of the reference persons of the young person (volunteers, mentors, persons in which he/she trusts) into the process of planning the transition to autonomous life.

From the perspective of the attachment theory:

- a). The nomination or hiring of social parents within the residential care system of any type, for the personalization of care relationships.
- b). Training staff to understand the role of attachment in children's development. The inclusion of attachment knowledge in specialized studies for educators working in the child protection system.
- c). Assisting young people in the child protection system to process traumatic events experienced by young people in the child protection system by offering appropriate psychological/therapeutic support.

From the perspective of Human Agency Theory:

- a). Exposing young people from the family type units to practical learning opportunities.
- b). A more visible implication of young people in the decisions made for them.

From the perspective of the ecological systems theory:

- a). The reorientation of the values and rules acting at the level of public opinion – i.e. at the macrosystemic level - towards the acceptance and valorisation of this social category and implicitly giving up the currently existing discriminatory practices.
- b) At a macrosystemic level, we recommend the adoption of legislative measures stipulating free medical psychological counselling/therapy services, as well as easier access to housing alternatives for young people leaving the child protection system.

From the perspective of the social role theory:

- a). Institutional support offered to the employees in acknowledging the professional identity and the clarification of the professional role attributions taking into account the complexity, the dynamic and challenging character of these attributions.
- d). The support of the organisations/institutions acting for the benefit of the population subject to study, as well as of the partnerships for the establishment of a network facilitating collective actions.

As regards furthering the research, we deem useful the approach of the issue concerning the affective needs, loneliness, self-esteem and self-image of young people in care. Studies analysing the deinstitutionalization of children with disabilities, before they reach the age of adolescence, respectively the results recorded in the case of reintegration into the natural family, as well as national and international adoptions can also provide valuable data regarding the different routes followed by children/young people who left care. We estimate necessary furthering the studies tackling the circumstances stimulating the resilience of children and teenagers in child protection system and monitoring the results in the field of social integration. Also, extensive studies measuring the impact of the support measures provided by the legal framework for young people leaving care are necessary.

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Laws

- Law no. 152/1998 on the the establishment of the the National Agency for Housing, republished, with the subsequent modifications and additions.
- Law no. 76/2002 on the unemployment insurance system and the stimulation of the employment of the workforce
- Law no. 272/2004 Child Rights Protection and Promotion, republished, as amended and supplemented.

Electronic resources

- ANPDCA https://mmuncii.ro/j33/images/buletin_statistic/copil_2022.pdf accessed on 15/07/2023.
- <https://copii.gov.ro/1/date-statistice-copii-si-adoptii/> accessed on 15/07/2023.