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CARE LEAVERS' MODELS OF ENTERING ADULTHOOD: ANALYSIS OF REPORTS CONCERNING THE PROCESS OF GAINING INDEPENDENCE

**Modele wchodzenia w dorosłość wychowanków pieczy zastępczej:
analiza raportów dotyczących procesu uzyskania samodzielności**

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Abstract

This paper aims at identifying models of adulthood dominating in the discourse concerning care leavers. The conducted qualitative analysis of reports devoted to the process of gaining independence by care leavers from the period 2010-2020 indicates that the present institutional model of adulthood is not adequate to the social, cultural, and economic conditions in which transition to adulthood of contemporary young people occurs. It is also not conducive to the flexibility and multiplicity of life paths constructed by care leavers. Alternative models of adulthood implied in the conclusions and recommendations formulated in the analyzed reports evidence the need for an open discussion concerning the change of policies and practices as regards the organization and course of the process of gaining independence by care leavers.

Keywords: adulthood, models of adulthood, the process of gaining independence by care leavers, qualitative text analysis.

Streszczenie

W artykule podjęto próbę identyfikacji modeli dorosłości dominujących w dyskursie usamodzielnienia wychowanków pieczy zastępczej. Przeprowadzona jakościowa analiza treści raportów dotyczących procesu usamodzielnienia wychowanków instytucjonalnej pieczy zastępczej z lat 2010–2020 sugeruje, że obecny instytucjonalny model dorosłości nie jest adekwatny do warunków społeczno-kulturowych i ekonomicznych, w jakich przebiegają transycje w dorosłość współczesnych młodych ludzi, nie sprzyja wielości i elastyczności konstruowania ścieżek życiowych wychowanków. Alternatywne modele dorosłości występujące we wnioskach i rekomendacjach analizowanych raportów dowodzą potrzeby otwartej dyskusji nad zmianą polityki i praktyk w zakresie organizacji i przebiegu procesu usamodzielniania wychowanków instytucjonalnej pieczy zastępczej.

Słowa kluczowe: dorosłość modele dorosłości proces usamodzielnienia wychowanków instytucjonalnej pieczy, jakościowa analiza tekstu.

Introduction

Postponed adulthood, suspended adulthood, nonadult-adults, delayed adulthood, alternative adulthood: these are exemplary terms applied by social researchers to describe the phenomena that accompany the process of becoming an adult. Despite their rather pejorative meanings, indicating the ‘unpunctuality’ of the attainment of developmental tasks, these categories simultaneously mark changes that have occurred and continue to occur as regards the patterns of entering adulthood by contemporary young people.

“Normatively determined life cycle in modern societies was organized around professional work and in this cycle the following stages occurred in a linear and specific chronological order: education, professional work, economic independence, marriage, and parenthood”. Today, the process of transition from adolescence to adulthood “is characterized by destandardization, deinstitutionalization, dechronologization” (Grotowska-Leder, 2019, p. 8). Hence, it is more difficult to pinpoint the moment when one becomes an adult, but also transition trajectories are more individualized, uncertain, and unpredictable. As Iwona Kudlińska-Chróścicka rightly observes, “transitions into adulthood occur in difficult circumstances for young people, in a multiplicity of possible solutions, and a multiplicity of tasks: when they often do not want to (although they should), or cannot (although they would like to) enter the stage of full adulthood” (2019, p. 37).

The multiplicity of transition paths into adulthood and flexibility, as regards normatively determined developmental tasks (delaying, prolonging, and suspending developmental tasks), refer to the majority of young adults seeking independence, except for individuals from underprivileged environments (Rek-Woźniak, 2016), including those brought up in care centres. The legal and institutional system “pushes” adolescent care leavers, who lack family resources, and have low social capital, into adult life (Kudlińska-Chróścicka, 2019, p. 37). Generally, the care system does not offer

care leavers the systemic possibility to delay the moment of separation* from the hitherto educational environment, and what is even more difficult, to return to this environment in the case of life difficulties.

The model of gaining independence by care leavers adopted in Poland is largely based on the assumed (consciously, or not) conception of adulthood. Is this conception adequate in the changing conditions in which care leavers' transition into adulthood occurs? If so, how does it create space for the flexible and autonomous creation of a personal life path by care leavers, while simultaneously providing a "bumper" for cracks, changes of direction, and pace that happen on the way to independence?

When searching for answers to these questions, I analyzed reports from empirical studies devoted to the process of care leavers' entering into adulthood. The choice of reports as the source of data resulted from two premises: First, the structure of empirical reports, irrespective of the adopted research perspective, obliges the researcher to place analyses in a specific theoretical perspective (the conception of adulthood). Second, the communicative function of the reports impacts on the transfer of the results and recommendations for the practical application.

Adulthood: models and assessment criteria

Adulthood is a specific and, as claimed by M. Malewski (2013), "troublesome" scientific category. On the one hand, it is multidimensional and complex because it is defined from the perspective of many scientific disciplines, although not always involving adequate markers of adulthood. On the other hand, being rooted in collective consciousness, it functions as a guardian of the time, and manner of fulfilling the roles determined for an individual by society.

Commonly, adulthood is understood as the life stage following adolescence, and itself consisting of a few stages. To be an adult (to become an adult) means, as E. Dubas indicates, "to attain a social status of an adult person since a certain moment in the course of life after entering the period of formal adulthood" [...], "becoming an adult" is "a process of permanent improvement in the roles of an adult person, maturing to full adulthood, while being formally adult" (2015, p. 11).

Adulthood is described in social sciences in a variety of ways. Three models of adulthood may be differentiated: static, dynamic, and postmodern (Dubas, 2015).

In the static model, adulthood results from socialization (Malewski, 1990), and means that the individual undertakes socially defined roles and tasks. Adulthood is determined by objective factors, constructed in relation to linear psychological (R. McCrae, P. Costa), or stadial developmental conceptions (Ericson, Levinson). In these conceptions, development is treated as a gradual accumulation of experiences

* Young people in care may, by consent of the head of the institution, remain in the care center until the age of 25, on condition they continue their education.

gained by an individual during the interaction with the environment (linear), or the individual's transition to a higher developmental level as a result of overcoming/solving crises specific for particular life stages, or the attainment of developmental tasks typical of a given stage (stadial). A successful solution of the crisis, or fulfilment of developmental tasks, is also associated with the emergence of the moment of learnability that is "the moment of a complete biological, motivational, and social preparation of the individual to fulfil tasks" (Waldowski, 2002, p. 57).

The key tasks of this stage include: diminishing the dependence on the family of origin (completing schooling, becoming financially and residentially independent, beginning full-time work), and "preparation of the basis for life in the adult world (establishing the conception of adult life, planning life aims, defining one's identity)" (Rek-Woźniak, 2016, p. 78). Objective markers of adulthood also include formal and legal criteria: gaining the age of majority, driving license, voting rights. Adulthood, once the individual attains these markers, is "granted", in other words, since a specific moment in life a person is always adult.

A dynamic model perceives adulthood as an individual's maturity. In this model the criteria are subjective and constructed in relation to two different psychological conceptions of human development. Adulthood is treated as having the identity of an adult person (the sense of adulthood), or as psychological and social maturity.

The first approach is based on the assumption that an adult is a person who perceives oneself as an adult. The assessment "criterion" is having the identity of an adult person. The sense of identity results from collecting different information concerning oneself, assessment of this information, and the associated manner of experiencing oneself as well as – since the period of adolescence – self-reflection. Psychology differentiates four components to describe one's identity from a personal perspective: the sense of distinctiveness, the sense of coherence, the sense of continuity, and the sense of integrity (Oleś, 2011). Building the identity of an adult, as observed by A. Brzezińska (2016), is characterized by undertaking obligations, understood both as decisions concerning further life actions, and taking responsibility for the results of these decisions. It also entails a personal involvement in some activity, and a conscious investment of one's energy in a specific practical (further education, professional employment, establishing a family), or mental (the choice of ideology, a specific worldview) domain, hence leading to the self-continuity in time and space. The identity status with which an individual enters adulthood plays a very important role, and for many years largely decides about the quality of the attainment of developmental tasks in successive life stages.

Adulthood may be also perceived in the context of the individual's psychological and social maturity (Gałdowa, Chlewiński). In this approach, individual maturity may be seen as a continuum, with different intensity levels at particular developmental stages, assuming the process is continuous and embraces the individual's entire life

(Chlewiński, 1991). Thus, one can speak about a gradual achievement of individual maturity, rather than its achievement as such, and as claimed by A. Galdowa, about “larger, or smaller approximation to maturity” (1992, p. 24).

The postmodern model perceives adulthood as a relative, ambivalent and individualized phenomenon. Interactions between the individual and the environment are decisive for the dynamics of one’s development, rather than natural developmental tendencies per se. “A person does not so much grow up to successive developmental stages (for which the sociocultural context has only a modifying significance), but is subject to this context, and develops in line with the rhythm determined by the nature of interactions with the environment” (Oleś, 2011, p. 30). Transitions through successive developmental stages are associated neither with one’s official age, nor with manners of fulfilment assigned to particular roles, nor socially defined developmental tasks at successive life stages, but with “a system of life situations – both individual and historical, that occur in the background of specific cultural norms and socio-economic circumstances” (Oleś, 2011, p. 30). It should be stressed that the context in which an individual develops embraces also the axiological dimension, i.e., the individual manner of understanding and valuation of social expectations, decoding developmental tasks, or perception of opportunities and dangers in their attainment. Consequently, people who function in the same social and historical context construct their individual paths leading to adulthood differently, not always in compliance with social standards and times.

Psychological contextual models of adulthood allow for the explanation of the course of changes and the description of development trajectories of individuals of similar personality traits who interact with dissimilar environmental factors, and also of individuals characterized by different features who interact with the same environment (Oleś, 2011). Such models also facilitate the understanding of the reasons for multiple and alternate paths of entering adulthood in the context of social, economic, political, and cultural transformations, and of the phenomenon of young people’s “falling out” of programs aiming at supporting their professional and social integration.

The differentiated models of adulthood imply, as observed by E. Dubas (2015), three dissimilar conceptions of the preparation for adulthood:

1. conducive to gaining by the individual competences of being an adult, i.e., gaining the state defined by objective indicators of adulthood,
2. conducive to gaining competences of the permanent state of becoming an adult, i.e., gaining by an individual the subjective sense that one is ready to undertake successive obligations and responsibility for life choices;
3. conducive to gaining competences that combine being and becoming an adult. This means that the preparation for adulthood should embrace both “competences of mature coping with both developmental and sociocultural changes” (Dubas, 2015, p. 13).

Preparation for adulthood requires young people to make many strategic decisions concerning different spheres of life. However, due to the dynamics of sociocultural and economic changes in late postmodernity, the period of attaining full adulthood is actually prolonged. In the process of becoming adults, individuals experience events that ruin the planned order of the course of this process, thus enforcing its multiple modifications, corrections, and changes.

Method

The process of gaining independence by care leavers is an exceptionally important period for preparing young people to become adults. The valid legislation divides this process into two stages (Chrzanowska, 2017). During the first stage, the care leaver indicates an assistant to supervise the process of gaining independence with whom an individual program of gaining independence is designed. This program specifies the care leaver's plans concerning education, professional qualifications, employment, and indicates the possibilities to obtain adequate housing. The second stage occurs once the care leaver gains the age of maturity and leaves the care centre. At this stage, care leavers implement the individual programs of gaining independence and may benefit from various forms of material and nonmaterial assistance planned for them.

The organizational framework of the process of entering adulthood by care leavers legalize the tasks undertaken by care leavers and their assistants, but does not provide answers to key questions from the perspective of the preparation to adulthood: Is the institutional model of the process care leavers' gaining independence adopted in Poland adequate to the changing conditions in which their transition to adulthood occurs? Does this model allow them a flexible construction of their own life path, and if so, what kind of support do care leavers receive (II stage of the process) when it is necessary to change/modify the educational, professional, family transition path?

I searched for the answers to these questions by conducting a qualitative analysis of reports concerning the process of care leavers' gaining independence.

“Qualitative content analysis is one of numerous research methods used to analyze text data. Text data might be in verbal, print, or electronic form, and might have been obtained from narrative responses, open-ended survey questions, interviews, focus groups, observations, or print media, such as articles, books, or manuals. Qualitative content analysis goes beyond merely counting words. The goal of content analysis is to provide knowledge, and understanding of the phenomenon through the systematic classification process of coding and identifying themes or patterns” (Hsieh, Shannon, 2005).

The research process consisted of a few stages, consistent with the cyclical process of building qualitative data corpus suggested by Bauer and Aarts (2000). The first stage involved searching scientific texts database Google Scholar, employing the

heading “care leavers’ process of gaining independence”. The inclusion criterion for analysis was an article in Polish that included a report from the conducted empirical study concerning care leavers’ process of gaining independence. The second stage involved the preliminary analysis with the employment of coding based on the theory (Gibbs, 2011) in order to identify models of adulthood utilized as a theoretical framework for the conducted analyses. The third stage involved including successive texts to the analysis until obtaining the so-called theoretical sufficiency. At this stage two online databases were also searched: National Library and Microsoft Academic Search.

The first quantitative results of searching Google Scholar database for articles published in Polish between 2010 and 2020 with the use of the heading “care leavers’ process of gaining independence” revealed 21 records. These texts served to build the data corpus based on two criteria: 1) the content of the article referred to the process of care leavers’ gaining independence, 2) articles met the criteria for reports from empirical research.

Table 1. The thematic scope of the articles constituting the preliminary data corpus

No.	Title	Publication date	Key topic
1.	Biographies of adults raised in residential care institutions – an attempt of sociological analysis	2012	Retrospective sociological analysis of individuals, and groups living at risk of social exclusion on the basis of the example of adults raised in children homes.
2.	Adaptation to life of adults raised by foster families, or institutional family houses	2016	Assessment of competence for independent life of adults raised by foster families, or institutional family houses.
3.	Relation to the future of the becoming independent pupils coming from the unrelated foster families	2018	Case studies of three people growing up in unrelated foster care, entering the process of becoming independent.
4.	Support for the Process of Achieving Independence by Former Residents of Rehabilitation and Educational Institutions. Experiences of Participants in the Training Housing Project	2019	The process of becoming independent by young people leaving Polish youth educational centers (rehabilitation institutions).
5.	Preparation for independent living: Independent foster-child Care and Educational Institutions	2018	Assessment of preparation for independent life young people living foster care institution.
6.	De-institutionalisation of children’s residential care inmates — main problems, proposed solutions	2015	Three transitions into adulthood, as well as problem typical of de-institutionalisation phase are described within the broader biographical context.

No.	Title	Publication date	Key topic
7.	Independence through the eyes of youth. Research report	2012	Transition process into independent living.
8.	Aspirations and life plans of youth in a danger of social orphanage	2012	Plans of children from children's homes concerning the family life, and educational-professional plan.
9.	Problems of Older Adolescents at Exit from Foster Care	2016	Independent living of youth growing up in institutional and foster care.
10.	Psychosocial and material situation of young people living foster care institution	2012	Diagnosing the situation of the young people living foster care institution in terms of assessing the quality of support addressed to these people.
11.	Effectiveness of the process of self-empowerment of pupils of institutional foster care	2018	Diagnosis institutions to prepare young people for independent functioning in adult life.

The initial data corpus comprised 11 articles. The texts focused on: the assessment of the preparation for independent life of young people in care institutions (4 articles), preparation of young people in care institutions to function in adult life (2 articles), plans and aspirations of care leavers who were placed in socializing institutions (1 article), evaluation of support programs dedicated to care leavers in the process of gaining independence (4 articles). Studies were carried out with the application of different research methods, both quantitative (surveys using a questionnaire) and qualitative (mostly biographical). In four articles, the authors utilized a few techniques, including: focused group interview, and analysis of existing data.

The categorization key utilized in the analysis of the preliminary corpus was constructed based on theoretical models and respective formal markers of adulthood.

Table 2. Categorization key constructed on the basis of theories

Adulthood model	Adulthood markers	Preparation for adulthood (key words)
Adulthood as undertaking socially defined tasks, and roles (static model)	completing education, beginning full-time work, gaining residential independence, economic independence, establishing the family, becoming a parent	independence, self-reliance, family, professional, social citizen autonomy, self-sufficiency
Adulthood as maturity / gaining the identity of an adult (dynamic model)	undertaking obligations by the individual, taking responsibility, gaining the sense of independence, distinctiveness, integrity	identity, life orientation, social participation, personal resources, self-concept, maturity/adolescence

Adulthood model	Adulthood markers	Preparation for adulthood (key words)
Adulthood as interdependence (postmodern model)	building internal and external resources, creating the support system in the local community, development of competences that guarantee the completion of education and beginning of full-time work	interdependence, internal resources, external resources, relationship networks, life skills, effective independence

The analysis and interpretation process began with a thematic analysis which allowed for the identification of articles fragments, devoted to models and markers adulthood, and the process of preparation for gaining independence. Then, texts were coded, and relationships between the identified categories were established. In fragments referring to particular categories key words, synonyms, and collocations were searched for, and classified.

The process of care leavers' growing up – qualitative analysis of texts

The process of care leavers' growing up/gaining independence is treated in all analyzed texts as a significant and difficult turning point in life. It is not perceived as a one-time act of leaving a care centre, but as a long-term period of preparation for adulthood, consisting of three fundamental stages: stay in the care centre, designing the individual program of gaining independence before leaving the care centre, practicing independence outside the centre.

The institutional (static) model of adulthood dominates in the analyzed articles. Adulthood is equated with gaining independence by care leavers in accordance with the normatively determined life cycle: completing schooling, beginning full-time work, gaining residential independence, becoming financially independent, having personal stability (family). Becoming an adult is understood as the process of a gradual accumulation of life experiences. Systematically expanded care takers' personal resources, finally serve as their capital to undertake independent existence outside the care centre. The analyzed articles describe the preparation for adulthood mainly as tasks in stages II and III (designing the program of gaining independence, and its implementation), although it is assumed as something obvious that the process of gaining independence begins with the moment when the child arrives in the care centre, and begins to learn self-service skills, everyday life skills, and functioning in community. Resources indicated as of key importance for care takers, that should be obtained during institutional care, correspond to objective markers of adulthood, although various reservations as to their quality are formulated in the reports. As the analyses conducted by researchers indicate, the majority of care leavers attain a low level of education,

which makes it difficult for them to take up employment. Low education levels and difficulties in the job market result in care leavers' problems with finding, and then maintaining employment. Residential independence in practice means either living in a council flat provided by the commune, with a living standard much lower than the conditions in the care centre, or returning to the family of origin (from which they were taken away, and placed in the care centre precisely due to poor living conditions). In extreme cases, leaving care means "independence to nowhere". The low level of economic capital of care leavers entering adulthood impacts negatively on their personal and family stability. Based on the results of the effectiveness of the process of gaining independence it may be concluded that entering adulthood by care leavers is, generally, yet another traumatic life experience for them.

In the analyzed reports, adulthood is also associated with autonomy and self-reliance. These categories are, however, treated as synonyms for independence, and do not introduce new senses and meanings to the understanding of the process of becoming an adult. It should be stressed that social time associated with punctuality of undertaking roles and tasks, and the problem of learnability – the preparation of care leavers for their undertaking – constitute the scaffolding for constructing the discourse of care leavers' adulthood. Interestingly, the static model of adulthood provides also a theoretical framework for studies carried out with the application of different methodologies: beginning with surveys, that aim at analyzing the level of care leavers' preparation for independence, and concluding with retrospective biographical analyses, in which subjects utilize institutionally constructed schemes to describe their personal experiences from the period of gaining independence.

Care leavers' difficulties in the process of gaining independence, identified in the course of empirical research, induce researchers to formulate conclusions, and recommendations concerning the existing institutional solutions. In these parts of the analyzed reports a changed perspective concerning the perception of the categories adulthood, and the process of preparation for adulthood may be observed.

The understanding of adulthood as maturity is indicated by suggestions to prolong the time necessary to gain independence, to customize the paths of gaining independence, and to resign from the unification of the support system for care leavers. Presently, each care leaver receives the same support aiming at gaining life independence, and integration within the community. This includes: financial support to continue education, moving-in allowance in kind, financial assistance to gain independence. Forms of assistance provisioned by legislation do not differentiate between care leavers in terms of their individual sense of emotional and social maturity, and a fragmentarily experienced adulthood (in some respects young people feel ready to undertake adult obligations, in other respects they do not).

An alternative model of adulthood is related to suggestions concerning solving problems when the process of gaining independence fails. Since the process of gaining

independence abounds in various crises, it is justified to build for care leavers a support network in the local community, involving people outside the group of those who directly support the process of gaining independence (assistant supervising the process of gaining independence), based on personal and external resources. Adulthood as interdependence does not mean autonomy understood as being independent of others, but a skill to establish relationships in both formal and informal social groups in which an adult functions. Although informal support networks cannot serve as the only alternative for the activities of public services, the closest local community may successfully protect care leavers against social exclusion and isolation.

Conclusions

The qualitative analysis of the articles constituting the preliminary corpus of data relating to the process of gaining independence by care leavers leads to a pessimistic conclusion. The static model of adulthood that dominates in the discourse on care leavers' gaining independence is not adequate to those sociocultural, and economic conditions, in which contemporary young people's transitions into adulthood take place. This model is not conducive to the multiplicity, and flexibility factors inherent in constructing life paths. The unified support system cannot satisfy the different needs of care leavers, who mature differently in time to undertake obligations, and take responsibility for their future outside an institutionalized care system. In the process of transition into adulthood, prolonged due to the dynamics of civilizational changes, solutions in the event of a false start into adulthood, i.e., failures and crises that care leavers face during the process, have not been designed. In the case of the crisis concerning the environment in which socialization occurred, the lack of support received by members of functional family systems means, that care leavers who enter adulthood become dependent on the support of institutions and their offer.

Alternative models of adulthood included in recommendations and conclusions from the reports evidence the growing readiness of academics and practitioners to meet in an open discussion concerning necessary changes in social policies, and practices as regards the process of care leavers' gaining independence.

The significance of the problems, and the need for change justify the necessity of continuing comparative and international analyses.

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