

INSIGHTS INTO STRUCTURALLY IDENTICAL EXPERIENCES OF RESIDENTIAL CARE ALUMNI: THE PARADOX OF BECOMING AUTONOMOUS IN A RESIDENTIAL CARE FACILITY

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Abstract: In this study, which is part of my PhD thesis project, I used the documentary method of interpretation to analyze a discourse on the prospect of leaving care and living autonomously that emerged from group discussions among youth living in a residential setting in *Alto Adige* [South Tyrol], Italy. The documentary method of interpretation not only examines the explicitly expressed contents of the discourse, but also reconstructs the young person's implicit, or atheoretical, knowledge underlying and orienting habitualized social action. The method focuses on group-based social patterns that, when applied in care-leaver research, give valuable insights into structurally identical experiences young people in institutions of residential care share that concern the normative educational goal and expected learning outcome of autonomy. The analysis of the group discussions suggests that becoming autonomous in a residential institution is, from the perspective of the young people, a paradoxical arrangement with compulsory character, and that they have developed group-specific patterns and strategies to manage it. This article will present those social patterns and strategies. An understanding of the influence of the paradox is necessary if we are to improve outcomes of the social pedagogical treatment model in residential care settings and thus improve the life chances of residential care alumni and the experience of leaving care for young adults.

Keywords: residential care, residential care alumni, care leaver, transition to adulthood, autonomy, experiences of residential care alumni

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Young people who have received long-term group care in residential homes have significant difficulties in taking steps toward autonomous living, steps they must take earlier in life — and thus with less preparation — than youth living in mainstream families, even though insufficient preparation has been proven to be detrimental to care leavers' future possibilities. Stein (2006) offered some reasons:

They are more likely than young people who have not been in care to have poorer educational qualifications, lower levels of participation in post-16 education, be young parents, be homeless and have higher levels of unemployment, offending behaviour and mental health problems (p. 273).

Tänzler & Luckner (2012), who investigated “nine lives after [residential youth] care”, concurred that some factors are likely to cause social exclusion after care:

low or missing qualifications after compulsory education, lack of integration into the first job market, poverty, problems finding housing and jobs, particularly among ethnic minorities, bad health care services and a high risk for delinquency¹ (p. 139).

Some current international literature on care-leaving concentrates on the policies and legal frameworks of various countries, including European ones (e.g., Barbarotto & Mineo, 2012; Lerch & Stein, 2010; Munro, Stein, & Ward, 2005; Stein & Munro, 2008). In several countries, those studies revealed a lack of statistical data about care leavers and their processes of leaving care, which hampers the establishment of a broad research base for the issue. There is little research focused on group residential facilities in general and a lack of evidence-based research on outcomes for youth placed in such settings.

As South Tyrol has a substantial German-speaking majority, many schools are German-speaking, and a strong connection is maintained to German culture. Because the German tradition of social pedagogy is upheld in professional work there, the German literature is relevant to the current study. In Germany the five best-known studies on effects of residential care are Planungsgruppe Petra (1988), the so-called JULE study (Baur, Finkel, Hamberger, Kühn, & Thiersch, 1998), the *Jugendhilfe-Effekte-Studie* [Youth Welfare Effects Study], called JES (Bundesministerium für Familie, Senioren, Frauen und Jugend, 2002), the *Evaluation erzieherischer Hilfen* [Evaluation of educational aids] called EVAS (Macsenae & Knab, 2004) and the *Bundesmodellprogramm wirkungsorientierte Jugendhilfe* [Federal model program impact-oriented youth welfare] (Albus et al., 2010). The mentioned studies have a wide range of methodological approaches and are of varying scope. In the studies where care leavers are actually interviewed, their individual retrospective views on the residential care setting are the main focus. This is also true for international care leaver studies, and for the majority of the 33 empirical studies

¹ All translations from German are my own

in various (mostly European) countries that are discussed by Harder, Köngeter, Zeller, Knorth, and Knot-Dickscheit (2011), who described — for the first time systematically — the methodological approaches that have been used in care-leaver research. The selection of the studies was not itself based on systematic research, but was informed by the *International Research Network on Transitions to Adulthood from Care* at Loughborough University. Harder et al. (2011) warn of the difficulty of making valid causal inferences in such studies:

Since many studies on transition from care into adulthood include only one sample of young people and relatively small sample sizes, it is difficult to draw causal inferences between the care that is being offered and the outcomes that are achieved. (p. 2439)

Furthermore, there is insufficient literature about the characteristics of the various settings, services, and youth served.

The Social Pedagogy Model and Autonomy as an Educational Goal

Group care practice in many European countries employs the social pedagogy model, which provides a “methodology based on an intervention project with pedagogical planning and involves well-grounded goals, working models, activities, and techniques” (del Valle, 2014, p. 2955). In contrast to some English-speaking countries, where those working in residential care programs often have no specific qualifications (del Valle, 2014, p. 2955), *Alto Adige* [South Tyrol], Italy, where the investigation took place, provides a university degree and “qualification in social pedagogy ..., which equips its holders to work with dependent populations, notably those in child residential care” (del Valle, 2014, p. 2955). In the Italian language the qualification is named *educatore sociale* [social educator]. In the social pedagogy model of preparation of future care leavers, *autonomy* is a normative educational goal, one that encompasses life-skills, decision-making competencies, responsible social behaviour, and more. As Wolf (2002) phrased it:

Autonomy is a central objective of education ... education which fails to ensure that children reach autonomy, is not successful. ... Particularly in residential group care the question of ‘how children reach autonomy?’ is a precarious question. Considering educational plans (helping plans) which are directed to youth, transition to autonomy emerges everywhere. (p. 9)

In the present study young people in residential care were asked about autonomy and their lives after care.

Contrary to the institutional expectation that young people in residential care institutions will undergo a smooth process of competence acquisition towards the desired objective of

autonomy, a structurally identical experience² among young people in institutions of residential care is that becoming autonomous in a residential institution is a paradoxical arrangement with compulsory character. In order to manage it they have developed the group-specific *sprachliche Handlungsmuster* [patterns of communicative action] portrayed in this study.

Method

As elaborated earlier, pathways of youth leaving care (both foster care and residential care) are usually investigated on an individual biographical level from a retrospective perspective. This qualitative study presents a different research approach, one that looks ahead to the impending transition from care, and focuses on the group rather than the individual level. The aim of the investigation has been to analyze specific and significant group discourse and to utilize the knowledge gained to enhance the effectiveness of group care practice in relation to the preparation of young adults for leaving care. The research is based on an analysis of group discussions with three groups of young care leavers (20 young people, aged 12 to 19 years) in a residential setting in South Tyrol. The young people were asked to discuss amongst themselves their prospects with regard to leaving the care setting and living autonomously. Six group-specific patterns of communicative action emerged as an answer to the paradoxical situation they were in regarding the educational objective of autonomy. The data were analyzed using the documentary method of interpretation (Bohnsack, 2014, p. 222), which allows not only interpretation of the explicitly expressed contents, but also the reconstruction of the young person's implicit or *atheoretical* knowledge, which underlies and orients habitualized social action.

The formal frame of communication in group discussions (which always takes the form of passages from the initiation to the conclusion of a topic) offers a relatively constant framework in which to distinguish particular implicit meanings or rules among a group through a sequence analysis of the transcribed text of the group discussion. There are two consecutive steps in the analysis: the *formulating interpretation*, which reveals the topical structure of the text by asking what was said in a communicative manner; and the *reflecting interpretation*, which reveals with which structure the topic is dealing. Bohnsack (2014) explained that an utterance

is determined by the reaction of the other participants, respectively, by a sequence of reaction and re-reactions; the interpretation of the relation between an (empirically observed) utterance and an (empirically observed) reaction opens up access to the constituted *implicit meaning* or the *implicit rule* (p. 223).

² Bohnsack explains that structurally identical experiences result from “being involved in a specific every day practice” (Bohnsack, 2014, p. 222), such as the residential care setting. His term for such a milieu is a “conjunctive space of experience”, which can be traced in a sequential analysis of the linguistic expressions in group discussions. This study detected few structurally identical experiences in the group of young people living in the residential group home. In fact, only one was identified among the 20 participants: the paradoxical arrangement with compulsory character in relation to the normative educational objective of autonomy.

He also noted that:

Individuals sharing a common a-theoretical knowledge and experiences, and thus a habitus, are connected by the elementary form of sociality, which we call “conjunctive knowledge” or “conjunctive experience” [to be distinguished from the communicative level of interaction]. They *understand* each other immediately. (pp. 221–222)

In the analysis this emerges in the form of *homologous reactions* (Bohnsack, 2014, p. 224) in a *case-internal comparative analysis* (Bohnsack, 2014, p. 228). Questions answered in this step of the analysis are: What kinds of orientation can be traced? What is the group’s mindset in reference to each topic? Through comparative analysis between cases (each discussion constitutes one case) it is possible to analyze how the different groups perform differently in relation to the same topics. A common frame of orientation that has been arrived at by comparing different cases is called a *type*. The *sociogenetic typification* eventually tries to answer the question of what is typical about the orientation or habitus.

In conducting group discussions the aim is to create an almost *natural conversation* among the group members so that they can develop their own discourse organization, which can be reconstructed afterwards. The moderator has to formulate the initial question vaguely enough to prevent a *proposition*, which would necessarily impose a predetermined orientation upon the group. In the case of the group discussions in this study, the question on autonomy amounted to a proposition because autonomy is a normative learning objective in the participants’ institutional context. That, among other factors³, meant that the group discussions effectively became a reenactment of the care setting and the transcribed text became mainly a source for reconstructing how the groups deal with the hierarchical structure of the setting and with definitions of autonomy as imposed through the institutional authorities. The groups used different patterns of communicative action, as defined by Ehlich and Rehbein (1979):

Patterns of communicative action are forms of standardized options of actions, which are actualized and realized in concrete actions. The actors realize their ends in their actions. The single patterns form a potential for the realization of ends, they are utilized by actors in their actions. Each pattern is related to a specific end of potential actors and is structured through this end. This relation can also be briefly termed like this: the pattern has its end; it is functionally oriented toward that end. (p. 250)

³ I, as one of the moderators of the group discussion, had been a former educator of the participants in one of the three groups, and the setting of the group discussion did not obscure the institutional setting. Even though participation in the discussion was voluntary and informed consent was given, it took place in the institution where most of the young people are non voluntary clients. This paper is based on my thesis research, which was admitted by the Doctoral Advisor and Advisory Committee at the University of Innsbruck, which included an ethical check and approval of the project.

Patterns of communicative action are collective in nature: they are not developed through individual action. The patterns refer to ends that are not arbitrary, but have been developed in specific contexts, like that of group care in the residential home with its specific demands. In the discussions multiple levels overlap; these are separated out in the analysis. There is the level of the orientation frame of the institution, which was imposed upon the group in the beginning of the discussion, and which they have to wade through until they are able to develop their own points of relevance in the discourse. There is also the level of the orientation frame of the young people themselves, which is defined by affirmation of and resistance to the orientation of the institution.

Participants in Group Discussions

There were 20 participants in the group discussions, in three natural groups of six, eight, and six youth who lived together in the care setting as flatmates. Table 1 shows who took part in which group discussion, and how the groups are constituted.

Table 1 *Participants in Group Discussions*

Participant	Age	Birth Place	School or Job	Discussion Group
Lm	16	Venezuela	Vocational school	“XMAS”
Km*	17	Morocco	Apprenticeship	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 16 to 18 years • 4 male, 2 female • 50% from local background (according to birthplace) • 1 unaccompanied minor refugee
Ym	18	South Tyrol ^a	Vocational school	
Cm	17	South Tyrol	Vocational school	
Tf	17	South Tyrol	High school	
Ef	18	Kosovo	Apprenticeship	
Am*	18	Afghanistan	Waiter	
ANm	18	Germany	Internship	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 14 to 18 years • 2 male, 6 female • 63% from local background (according to birthplace) • 1 unaccompanied minor refugee
Mf	17	South Tyrol	Apprenticeship	
Jf	18	South Tyrol	High school	
STf	14	South Tyrol	Vocational school	
Pf	15	Brazil	Internship	
Kf	14	South Tyrol	Junior high school	
Vf	16	South Tyrol	Internship	
Gm	19	South Tyrol	Housekeeper assistant	
Dm	18	Russia ^b	Vocational school	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 12 to 19 years • 4 male, 2 female • 83 % from local background (according to birthplace)
Om	12	South Tyrol	Junior high school	
Cf	14	South Tyrol	Vocational school	
Af	16	South Tyrol	Junior high school	
Nm	13	South Tyrol	Junior high school	
Totals	10 male youth (50%) 10 female youth (50%) 13 youth born in South Tyrol (65%) and 7 in other countries (35%) — 5 male and 2 female 2 male unaccompanied minor refugees (10%)			

Note. Each participant is identified by an abbreviation (upper-case character) and gender (lower case character m or f). ^aSecond generation immigrant; parents from Morocco and Tunisia. ^bAdopted as a baby by South Tyrolean parents and grew up in South Tyrol. *Unaccompanied minor refugee.

Recurring Patterns of Communicative Action in the XMAS Group

What was expressed during the discussions represents primarily the explicit content, which is — according to the documentary method of interpretation — analyzed through the first step of the formulating interpretation. In this step the *communicative contents* are explored. Through the subsequent reflecting interpretation the meaning of an utterance is explored in relation to the group context in which it was expressed. If, for example, an utterance was validated by the group or there is a shared conclusion to a sequence, there is shared meaning. Metaphors or other utterances with conjunctive knowledge relate to specific everyday life contexts in which specific shared experiences have been developed. One shared experience across all three groups is the paradoxical demand of becoming autonomous in the institution. Young people find themselves in a situation where they both ought to — and want to — be autonomous. If they act autonomously and as self-sufficient individuals and resist demands to become autonomous, they are thereby perceived as not self-sufficient. If they accede to demands to become autonomous, they are regarded as self-sufficient but are actually directed by others. There is no escape from this paradox, and the impression of being processed through the institution was enacted strikingly by the XMAS group: their drainpipe noise served as a metaphor for their situation. Communicative action patterns of *irony* and *self-debasement* as well as *self-aggrandizement* were preferentially used by the XMAS group in order to manage the *imposed framework*. These patterns were employed through the reenactment of the care setting and the corresponding relationships between educators and youth through the question of autonomy. An imposed framework is a power-based discourse that can be traced in the analysis with the documentary method of interpretation (Fremdrahmung, as cited by Bohnsack, 2003, p. 234).

At the beginning of the group discussion with XMAS in lines 1 to 5, Km identified himself as the second “Karin”, an allusion to a young woman with a learning disability who had left the group. Her ability to live autonomously was seen as limited. The reduced degree of autonomy that Karin had acquired, as perceived by the group, was used in this utterance as a standard for general success in the acquisition of autonomy, which was recognized as a major objective of educational processes in the institution. The irony of that utterance was understood by everyone in the group and validated through laughter.

- 1 Moderator: so, I would like to invite you now to the group discussion on the issue of
- 2 becoming autonomous in the group or, um, being autonomous.
- 3 various participants: L ((whispering during that sentence))
- 4 Km: **I am the second Karin**
- 5 Tf and various participants: L ((laughs))⁴

⁴ Transcriptions in this article were created according to the guidelines for transcription in the documentary method of interpretation as outlined in Nohl (2017, p. 123). Lower case is used throughout including at the beginning of sentences. L indicates an interjection. A parenthesized dot (.) indicates a pause for one second; a parenthesized number denotes a pause for multiple seconds. Text surrounded by at-signs indicates an exclamation with laughter (e.g., @yes@). Unclear speech is denoted by (), while doubled parentheses indicate remarks by the transcriber.

The joke is based on *conjunctive understanding* as a result of shared insider information and as a result of being involved in a specific everyday context inside the institution. Km’s indication that he would be the second Karin, implied that autonomous young people are produced in the institution as on an assembly line. He would be the second one off the assembly line in that logic, and the implication was that the production of autonomy functions suboptimally, or with little success.

In lines 13 to 17, Km added another ironical statement in reaction to the moderator’s statement that a lot of young people had already left the group in order to live autonomously. His answer carried the connotation that those remaining were *leftovers*, which functioned as an *ironic self-debasement*:

13	Moderator:	and all of you, especially when you have been here for longer have seen people
14		coming and going, your colleagues left
15-17	Km:	L we are the only ones remaining.

In lines 21 to 24, a metaphor for the group residential home — a drainpipe noise — was validated by all participants through laughter. The metaphor viewed life in the group home as a downward spiral, an undertow that led inevitably down. This descent could be associated with a social decline, or just the feeling of being processed and spat out. The comment “this is the [name of residential home]” was validated with laughter by all participants. The laughter and the comment occurred at the same time. It is both irony and a self-debasement of their group residential home, and their shared life world.

21	Km:	listen!
22		((drainpipe noise in the background))
23	various participants:	((laughs))
24	Km:	L this is the [name of residential home].

Later in the discussion, in a passage considering what life would be like if there were no rules (lines 618–639), the XMAS group played with the picture of “ending up under the bridge”, which emerged as a shared negative orientation or image connected to care-leaving in all three group discussions. In a passage self-initiated by the group, where they considered living together “like in a normal shared flat”, they developed an idea about what would happen if they lived together not in a residential home, but in a shared flat without any educators around. They fantasized fighting over something, ending with the picture of each one walking alone onto his or her bridge. The stigmatizing image that young care leavers would end up under the bridge is here taken on and changed in its meaning. If they had a struggle each of them would not end up under the bridge but would “walk onto his bridge”. Self-determined and active *walking* was portrayed,

Bold indicates a loud voice; text enclosed with ° indicates use of a lower voice; and underlined text was spoken with a higher intonation. Punctuation at the end of an utterance also indicates intonation: lowered (period), raised a little (comma), or raised a bit more (question mark). An elongated syllable is indicated by :: within the word.

instead of a passive *ending up*, and it is one’s own bridge that one walks onto, not under, but still all alone, and at one’s own behest. The stigmatizing attribution of society towards youth leaving care is at the same time both exaggerated and reinterpreted in that talk. To walk onto one’s bridge is like an act of heroism: the participants have played with a stigmatizing image and transformed it.⁵

- 618 Ef: imagine that we would all for instance be together
 619 but without the educators
 620 Tf: L like in a normal shared flat
 621 Ef: L that would be fun, wouldn’t it?
 622 Lm: L bo::tte::ga:[swearword, without specific meaning]
 623 Tf: really
 624 Ym: (.)then we would have to make rules among us
 625 Ef: yes but would this work out?,
 626 Lm: yes ((and at the same time someone says no))
 627 Ef: who would have for example ()
 628 Ym: L no:: perhaps not, perhaps
 629 someone says at one day, I don’t do what I ought to do because °it sucks°
 630 completely
 631 Tf: L I think so too
 632 Ym: L and one says you asshole, you jerk, I certainly do
 633 nothing for you, it is none of my business and then we fight each other and
 634 separate from each other,
 635 Tf: L I think so too.
 636 Ef: L what really?
 637 Ym: L °and then anyone°
 638 walks onto his bridge all alone.
 639 Tf, various participants: L ((laughs))

In the last passage, “drug-death fantasy” (lines 2214–2253), the XMAS group developed a heroic end-time scenario. One participant performed a drug-death fantasy, obsessed with his own effect and reducing everyone else to passive spectators. There were no more relationships among the group but only roles and the reflections of the hero on himself. The scenario “our drug party”, was constantly questioned by one participant, but they were all given roles by Ym, the main actor in his scenario. Many participants imagined the scenario but in the end only Ym “really wants to end like this”, while the other participants distanced themselves from that, or questioned Ym and “never want to end up like this”, or commented with “oh God”, or “oh green”.

- 2214 Ym: our drug party
 2215 Tf: yes exactly
 2216 Moderator: mmh how would it be if you would live together in a shared flat?

⁵ In German, to “land under the bridge” is an expression used in the passive voice to describe the inception of homelessness, implying that homeless individuals are themselves to blame for their situation. The young speaker changes this expression to “walks onto his bridge”, an active, self-reliant role. He decides where he is going and there is no consideration of guilt or shame.

- 2217 Ym: L if you come in the floor would already be sticky
 2218 Tf: L we all together? I would move out
 2219 Ym: L smoke. imperial cocaine
 2220 Ef: L mmmh
 2221 Lm: yeah when you two are together
 2222 Ym: the floor full of cocaine, no furniture with a syringe pinned
 2223 Tf: very autonomous [Ym's Name] very cool!
 2224 Ym: certainly that's how I, how we end up when we are together in a flat.
 2225 Lm: L whore
 2226 Ym: bottles everywhere
 2227 Tf: before I asked you if you would end up like this and you said no.
 2228 Lm: I can imagine already where it would be
 2229 Ym: L for sure God
 2230 Ym: full bottles, everywhere cigarettes on the floor, no furniture any more
 2231 ?: blood
 2232 Ym: we have sold everything
 2233 Ef: ()
 2234 ((laughs))
 2235 Ym: sold everything to buy drugs
 2236 Km: this was all
 2237 Ef: before the girls take him ()
 2238 Ym: L and to mainline
 2239 Lm: ()
 2240 Ym: the girl friend is tattooed and pierced everywhere, that's the girl friend.
 2241 ((laughs))
 2242 Tf: you find her like that
 2243 Ef: I can imagine you being there
 2244 Tf: am I fitting in well?
 2245 Ef: yeah I think he fits in well as well
 2246 Ym: you have to see my bed with the syringe and Kiss next to it ()
 2247 Tf: that's how you want to end up?
 2248 Ym: yes
 2249 Tf: very autonomous, before you did say something different
 2250 Lm: oh you never
 2251 Ym: that's how I really wanna end up, that's cool
 2252 Tf: oh my God
 2253 Km: oh green

Recurring Patterns of Communicative Action in the OSTERN Group

Whereas the XMAS group used irony and self-debasement as well as self-aggrandizement in their communicative action concerning imposed framework conditions, the OSTERN group utilized very different patterns of communication, namely the *neutralizing of an uncomfortable topic through fantasy* and *positive thinking*. Examples of the usage of these types of communicative action are shown below.

Lines 428 to 440 display the positive thinking pattern used by the OSTERN group. A *negative* (uncomfortable) topic was introduced, which seemed to have a disturbing emotional

effect on some of the participants. The uncomfortable topic was immediately circumvented using the comment, “Now we should speak about [Kf’s name] fingernails.” (line 435).

This comment followed a discussion (beginning in line 379) about a young man, a previous member of the OSTERN group whom many knew. A group member told the group that this young man did not earn enough money to afford his own room or flat. He then spent the night wherever he could, began drinking excessively, and eventually became homeless. This story was then associated with a perceived concurrent social crisis in Italy that was understood to make it very difficult to afford housing even when employed. The story prompted other exchanges: first, regarding the danger of drinking excessively; and second, regarding the fact that care-takers are no longer concerned about care leavers after they have moved out of the institution. The discussion was rapidly concluded with the comment, “Hey, come on — look what you have got us talking about!”, “Let’s talk about [Kf’s name] fingernails”, at which point the disturbing topic was laid to rest.

- 409 Am: I’m telling you this because he, because he said that he was happy when he
410 was living here, because all the care-givers helped him. they told him that they
411 could perhaps him find a place to stay. but since the day he moved out they
412 forgot all about him. where is he staying? what is he doing?
413 Vf: he hasn’t died, has he? ((laughs))
414 Am: no he hasn’t died, but
415 STf: but I see him sometimes on the street at night (.) drinking beer.
416 Group: (2)
417 Am: that’s not good. when you have problems, beer won’t help you solve them.
418 you know?
419 (2)
420 Vf: yes [Am’s name], that’s true
421 STf: yes [Am’s Name], that’s true
422 Kf: L yes
423 Vf: yeah really
424 Kf: L yes that’s true
425 Am: but if ((laughs))
426 Vf: it doesn’t seem as if you’re doing much...
427 STf: that’s right, we’re having a crisis, [Am’s Name]
428 Am: L no, I don’t. and I don’t drink either, cause...
429 STf: L that’s why we’ve got the beer.
430 Vf: ((laughs))
431 Am: hey, come on – look what you have got us talking about! (laughs)
432 STf: L it’s what you have to talk about every night
433 Mf: (now everybody’s awake) ((laughs))
434 Group: (7) ((laughs and groaning))
435 Vf: and now let’s talk about [Kf’s name] fingernails. I think in order to be able
436 to wear fingernails you’ll need — ((laughs))

There was also an effort made in lines 638 to 651 to change the subject of the discussion. The question arose: “Which is more important for autonomy — freedom and money, or

employment?” The topic was apparently found uninteresting, for it was not willingly discussed, raising comments like, “Let us be!” and “Leave us alone!” More interesting topics included the television series *Supernatural*, sexuality, and a particular care-giver, whose conduct often seemed to be an issue.

- 638 Vf: please leave us alone!
639 Mf: ((laughs))
640 Vf: I swear, I feel like I’m in handcuffs.
641 STf: no, not really. in handcuffs?(2) no, because I stand up when I want to.
642 Vf: yeah, but what would they do to us? right there is the camera. it will record us
643 as we leave. let’s go! bye ((looking into the camera)) ((laughs)) no I am joking!
644 Group: (9)
645 Pf: one. I’m counting sheep.
646 STf: ((laughs))
647 Vf: ((laughs))
648 Am: so, I’m going to give you a massage. stay still
649 ?: let’s count sheep.
650 Pf: see, no one can concentrate on this stuff.
651 let’s go.

A crisis was the topic of conversation in lines 227 to 253, which included a discussion of whether to buy a house “with a hundred men”. This drifting off into fantasy is seen repeatedly in the OSTERN group, and can be psychoanalytically interpreted as a group-based equivalent of a defence mechanism, which in this case would serve the function of protecting the ego.

Defence mechanisms are defined in psychoanalysis as mechanisms in which information can be processed unconsciously so as not to upset the delicate psychological balance. This balancing helps to reduce anxiety arising from stimuli, such as fear, shame or guilt. (Wenninger, 2000)

Laplanche and Pontalis (1999) define the term defence mechanism in their *Vocabulary of Psychoanalysis* as

all of the mechanisms dedicated to the limitation and/or suppression of any and all modifications which could endanger the integrity and steadfastness of the biopsychological individual. If the ego is an entity which strives to achieve and maintain this continuity, it can function as both an active and a passive factor in these mechanisms. Generally, defence mechanisms should guard against inner irritation/anxiety, possibly resulting in a situation which is contrary to the ego’s inner balance and therefore harmful. (p. 24)

The usage of the term defence mechanism has evolved over time, expanding the original concept to include a range of similar meanings. Tolerance of ambiguity and defence mechanisms are seen by Lothar Krappmann (2005, p. 133) as building one of the four categories of identity-promoting

capabilities⁶. Krappmann’s predominantly sociological perspective is not derived from the rigid psychoanalytical definition of identity development based upon step-by-step psychosexual development. His concept of identity implicates a dynamic process of “continuous establishment of balance between the norms and expectations required of each social individual, and the personal needs of the individual which are outwardly projected in order to limit or reject these social stipulations” (Krappmann, 2005, p. 68). The objective of this process-oriented identity is the capability of experiencing the integrity of the self, and the self’s integration in the outside world. The definition of “defence mechanism” used in this study is derived from this concept. The situation in which a group discusses a topic that is first, not interesting for the group members, and second, imposed upon them by (perceived) institutional representatives, could trigger a defence mechanism. Various forms of individual defence mechanism have been observed and described in the literature using both the psychoanalytical and Krappman’s (2005) perspectives.

The following presents a similar event of shared communications within the group. Analogous to the defending and protecting of a personal individual identity that are required in certain circumstances, Tajfel and Turner (1986) theorized that a shared group identity or social identity may also be shielded and secured. The OSTERN group’s preferred pattern of action can be described as drifting off into fantasy⁷; it can be interpreted as a group-based active competence that strives to achieve a balance between the imposed expectations of the institution (taking part in a group discussion) and the group’s desire not to participate.

- 227 Am: yes, because in Italy it’s too expensive. there aren’t any jobs. and when there
 228 is some job, they don’t pay you enough. if you earn one thousand euros it’s not enough to live
 229 Vf: L yes and there are lots of people who
 230 give up trying and just stay home.
 231 Am: L yeah but I know lots of people who really work
 232 and just can’t make ends meet. one guy who earns one thousand euro – what can he do
 233 with one thousand? his rent is eight hundred, plus gas, plus expenses, plus clothes. and that’s
 234 why he has to live with his family, even though he doesn’t want to.
 235 (3)
 236 Pf: I’m just going to enjoy myself.
 237 Am: and one who doesn’t feel good at home with his family
 238 some: L ((laughs))
 239 Am: L if there are problems with the family. do you hear me? (2) we have a
 240 hard time with that in Italy. (2) do you hear me [Kf’s name]?
 241 Kf: no
 242 Am: you’ll probably be thirty five years old before you understand that.
 243 STf: L we live in crisis times, that’s why there’s beer.
 244 Am: L **oh no. no I don’t live for a crisis,**
 245 STf: L ((laughs))
 246 Kf: L that’s why I’m waiting for you to get a place so I can stay with you

⁶ Krappmann’s (2005) four categories of identity-promoting capabilities are role distance, role acceptance and empathy, ambiguity tolerance, and defence mechanisms, also including identity portrayal.

⁷ Fantasy is also described as a defence mechanism in Zastrow (2011, p. 148).

- 247 sometimes.
248 STf: L that's what [Am's name] said
249 Am: great! I thought the same thing. let's just buy a house all together!
250 Pf: L yeah! with a hundred men! ((laughs))
251 Am: no! no! we don't want to make babies.
252 Pf: L a hundred and fifty.
253 STf: L @ [Jf's name] is here with her kindergarten.@
254 Kf: what no.
255 Jf: I'm going to be a teacher no @kindergarten@.
256 (3)
257 Am: yeah, right.
258 Kf: but you can teach my child.
259 Jf: yeah well let's just wait and see what happens.
260 Kf: let's say in eight years.
261 (4)

In lines 703 to 721, another example for the group-based equivalent for a defence mechanism was found, in which the group searches for a way out of the town where the institution is located, “into the universe” so they can find a place “away from everything normal, to live on the moon”. Here is also an example of the group choosing fantasy over discussion of realistic possibilities for action.

- 703 Moderator: do you talk to each other about autonomy/independence, or about your projects?
704 Vf: no, not really.
705 STf: L well, usually we just say no, no. usually we say that we want to get away,
706 because here it's like they put us in handcuffs.
707 here inside.
708 Vf:
709 L I'll just say what I always say: I can't wait to get away from here [the town where the
710 institution is located]. that's what I always say, you hear it from me every day.
711 Jf: I think that is the same for all of us (.)
712 Vf: L because [name of town where institution is located] has nothing to
713 offer for young people
714 Mf: L you have to get away from [name of town where institution is located]
715 – that's what everyone says because everyone knows that.
716
717 ?: no
718 Pf: L let's get out of the world. let's travel to the universe.
719 ?: get away from [name of town where institution is located]?
720 STf: let's go to Umbrien. it's not normal there, it's like being on the moon.
721 group: ((wild disorder)) (12)

Recurring Patterns of Communicative Action in the SILVESTER Group

Whereas the XMAS group used irony and self-debasement as well as self-aggrandizement in their communicative action concerning an imposed framework, and the OSTERN group neutralized an uncomfortable topic through fantasy and positive thinking, the SILVESTER group

repeatedly used *ritualized conclusion*, *normalization*, and *regression* as their preferred tools. Examples of the usage of these types of communicative action have been included below.

In lines 28 to 41, after finding themselves in disagreement over the sense (or senselessness) of the topic under discussion, many of the group members chose a ritualized conclusion by expressing “humpf” as a reaction. This type of ritualized conclusion was repeated later on in the discussion as group members emitted words such as “Bah!”, clucked like chickens, and made similar animal noises. Przyborski (2004) asserted that ritualized conclusion prohibits contradictory reference points from being expressed. This action, when containing performative elements, can be very impressive (p. 74). The SILVESTER group preferred to use performative, ritualized conclusions to end a contentious discussion or to shift reference points when there didn’t seem to be a consensus among the group members. In the course of the following discussion, performative aspects take on a more regressive character when they are examined using the psychoanalytical definition of defence mechanisms as a reference.

The following situation begins with Om asking the group what it means to be *pro* and *contra* something. Dm repeats the question.

- 28 Dm: L what is pro and contra of a subject!
 29 Af: L against something
 30 Dm: what is bad on a topic.
 31 Nm: () advantages and disadvantages
 32 group: (.)
 33 Om: where do you learn that? in third grade (.)? in which (.) subject?
 34 Nm: german, yeah
 35 Af: german
 36 Dm: but that is not the topic right now. (.) yes
 37 group: (6)
 38 ?: humpf
 39 ?: humpf
 40 ?: humpf ((again three times from someone, the last two times from Cf and Om))
 41 Dm: yeah, topic, no humpf. humpf is not a topic. (.)

In lines 142 to 159 while further discussing the present topic (though not the *official* topic), the group became loud and expressive, which would seem to indicate an important phase. Following a dispute over who must learn to be self-reliant or independent, *normalizing statements* were expressed, such as, “Everyone must learn to be autonomous”, and, “Everyone is here to learn to be autonomous”. By the term “normalizing”, I mean that the principle that everyone must learn to be independent was transformed into a general rule to be followed. Normalizing can also be found in lines 803 to 810 concerning the topic “assisted living”, as well as in lines 252 to 272, indicating that normalizing is a pattern of action repeatedly used by the SILVESTER group.

- 142 Af: but there are lots of people in this place who °need to learn how to be autonomous,
 143 not just. him°
 144 (2)

145 Dm: yeah. everybody, right?
 146 Cf: ((laughs)) yes everyone is -
 147 Dm: L here to learn to be autonomous, yeah
 148 Af: well, [name of Gm] already is ()
 149 Cf: L yeah he sometimes sets the breakfast table-
 150 Om: L ((laughs))
 151 Dm: stop playing with the cell phone. that is not autonomous. ((to Om))
 152 Om: yeah you. who do you think you are?
 153 Cf: L (yeah. who do you think you are? you're just a cow)
 154 Om: L yeah, what are you? you are a cow.
 155 Dm: L yeah. autonomous
 156 Cf: L cow
 157 Om: you're a cow, rabbit, pig, horse – all of them mixed.
 158 Dm: L is that a topic?
 159 ((the group makes random animal sounds))

In lines 803 to 810, the topic *autonomy in assisted living* was described using phrases such as “everyone must” and “whoever hasn’t yet ... learns then”. Living in the institution, learning how to be independent, and the learning of autonomy *while* living in the institution are described as “normal” and “obvious” frameworks of potential interaction, although it is dubious whether the goal of becoming autonomous can be best achieved in such a controlled living situation.

803 Cf: yes, you really must with the ()
 804 Af: so – anyone who’s ((laughs)) not yet autonomous learns how to be autonomous when
 805 she/he must do everything by her/himself.
 806 Nm: L () I went to do my kitchen chores and then
 807 Cf: yes, when you’re in assisted living, you have to do everything by yourself
 808 Af: shopping
 809 Cf: L shopping, yeah you learn to shop with the care-giver, but (.)
 810 Af: you also learn how to solve problems by yourself

In lines 259 to 267, the phrases “everyone knows”, “everyone should”, and so on serve the function of normalizing, representing the norm in relation to the context. Similarly, “everyone does” and “no one does” imply a moral stance on the topic of autonomy in the institution.

259 Om L autonomy
 260 never again alcohol, drugs, drinking (.) everything ()
 261 Cf: L yeah. e::everyone knows
 262 **what she/he does**
 263 ((noise))
 264 Cf: and everyone is responsible
 265 Dm: L () for what one does
 266 Af: L everyone should know where the borderline is.
 267 Cf: L yeah. right. (.)

Regression is described in psychoanalysis as a defence mechanism that helps one to master undesirable experiences. It is impossible to judge objectively if a type of behaviour is a defence mechanism or simply a creative construct; the same behaviour can be interpreted one way or the other depending upon the professional context. The childish behaviour of making silly noises can be seen as a regression by the SILVESTER group that, by demonstrating unity, helped to resolve a discord in the group in relation to both the discussion topic and the compulsory character of the discussion setting.

647 Moderator: is this somehow connected to autonomy or what?
648 group: ((the group members all say “baah”)) (15)
649 Cf: **de be**
650 Om: (You see, this is difficult for me. debe)
651 Cf: money money money
652 Om: mmmm mania mania mania
653 Dm: gack gack gack gack
654 Cf: moo
655 Om: We are wild animals! a wild tiger: meow
656 group: ((laughs))
657 Cf: you want me to punch you?
658 Dm: ((makes a sound like a horse))
659 Cf: ((laughs)) you’re a cow
660 Dm: does this sound like a cow? no, a pig. a pot-bellied pig.
661 Om: L yup. that’s a pig.
662 ((more animal noises are made and commented upon))

Lines 856 to 870 end the discussion:

856 Moderator stay here please. now we’ll ah now I’ll ah...I have something to...,should we, has anyone
857 anything else to say?
858 group members simultaneously – no
859 Moderator well then
860 Dm: yeah. baah yes baah
861 group: ((many group members simultaneously – baah))
862 Moderator has anyone got anything else
863 group: ((many group members simultaneously – baah))
864 Moderator ((laughs)) ok well then
865 group: ((many group members simultaneously – baah))
866 Moderator I’ve got a few questions for you
867 group: ((many group members simultaneously – baah))
868 Cf: be quiet!!!
869 Moderator: today you can all do this by yourselves, here are the papers
870 group: ((many group members simultaneously – baah)) (8)

After having examined the individual group discussions and viewed their differing and unique discourse tendencies, orientations, and recurring patterns of communicative action, the focus will now be directed to a cross-case comparison.

Sociogenetic Typification and Comparative Analysis

Group XMAS

Group XMAS consisted of four male and two female youth ranging in age from 16 to 18 years, with 50% from the local area according to their birthplace. XMAS formed the most inhomogeneous group in relation to geographic, cultural, and spoken language backgrounds, and the most homogeneous group in relation to their age-span of 2 years. Their recurrent patterns of communicative action in reference to imposed framework conditions were *irony* and *self-debasement* as well as *self-aggrandizement*. The paradox that goes along with the institutional demand that they ought to want to be autonomous, and the shared perception of being processed in the institution, was expressed, even performed, through creative means and caricatured, but partly also taken on as a possible orientation and form of social action. Youth-specific topics that were addressed in all groups, like sexuality and sexual orientation and identity, were discussed extensively in this group and were negotiated on the basis of gender roles. Different real-life chances were discussed in connection to gender roles and assigned to them. The topics cigarettes, alcohol, and drugs — means of addiction — also took some time in the discussion, which ranged from a drug-death scenario to the “after-work beer”. Money was addressed with the question of how to afford to rent a house or apartment. The negative orientation of *ending up under the bridge* was addressed twice in this group: first, as a form of *radical self-sufficiency* that could take place only outside the institution, where one *pays for oneself*, and if one sleeps under the bridge then one sleeps under the bridge; and second, ironically transformed into self-determined action to walk onto the (their own) bridge all alone after struggles with flatmates. XMAS was the only group where every member of the group participated in the discussion. The most involving and intense of the group discussions, it lasted over one and a half hours, and this group gave positive feedback to the setting and method of group discussion. They seemed to enjoy talking to each other about a defined topic.

Group OSTERN

Group OSTERN consisted of two male and six female youth ranging in age from 14 to 18 years, with 62.5% from the local area according to their birthplace. OSTERN was the only group with a female majority, and the only one in which most members had an Italian language background. There were two people who spoke little during the discussion, a young man from Germany and a young woman from South Tyrol. When group members participate only minimally in the discussion it is not clear whether they agree or disagree with the organization and meaning of the group’s discourse. As it is integral to the documentary method of interpretation to focus on group patterns, it is not possible to address single participants in group discussions directly and ask for their comments or opinions. The OSTERN group circumvented some topics; a recurrent pattern of communicative action in order to manage imposed framework conditions and the paradox was the *neutralizing of an uncomfortable topic through fantasy and positive thinking*. The orientation frame in that group was an ambivalence between wanting to leave the group and fearing to be abandoned. The idea of autonomy as total freedom outweighed the simultaneously held idea

in which taking responsibility for oneself was emphasized in regard to autonomy. The group perceived that it would be impossible to make a living (be financially autonomous) in an “Italy of crisis”. The topic of money was discussed extensively, including the prices of different things and how to afford them, possible ways to make money, and the legal prohibition of child labour, which means that young people are not allowed to take on a job before the age of 16. That was seen by the group as a barrier to earning money. Two of the youth-specific topics that were addressed in all groups, sexuality and identity, were used in this group as an alternative discussion option, which was seen as more attractive than the imposed topic of autonomy. The group mentioned that sexuality would have been a more congenial topic to talk about, and that “to be able to have sex, whenever one wants” was seen as an expression of freedom from institutional control. Sexual orientation and gender roles were not discussed; identity was discussed in relation to the TV series *Supernatural*, and specifically the character and look of the actors in that series. In contrast to the XMAS group, the OSTERN group did not make a connection to real-life chances in the future. The topics of cigarettes, alcohol, and drugs — means of addiction — were discussed in relation to the price of cigarettes and in relation to beer as a potential trouble-maker or problem-solver. The issue of drinking was connected to the story of the former group member who became homeless. His story also raised the issues of not being able to make a living because life is too expensive in Italy even when people have jobs, and of not being supported any longer by the institution, even after living in it for years. This also led to a discussion of the negative orientation — shared by all the groups — *to end up under the bridge or on the street*.

Group SILVESTER

Group SILVESTER consisted of four male and two female youth ranging in age from 12 to 19 years, with 83% from the local area according to their birthplace. SILVESTER formed the most homogeneous group in relation to geographic, cultural, and spoken language backgrounds, and the most inhomogeneous group in relation to their age-span of 7 years. This group used only German (except for some swear words in Italian). According to group dynamics it seemed to be the youngest group member who had the greatest power. Their recurrent patterns of communicative action in reference to imposed framework conditions were *normalizing* and ritual actions that acted as a form of *regression*. One distinctive trait of the SILVESTER group was the use of ritualized actions (shared singing and emitting of imitative animal sounds, and the collective transfer of topics to an animal analogy). In confrontation with the paradoxical demand by the institution that “residents should desire to be independent”, this group reacted by normalizing or creating norms on the one hand, and utilizing ritualistic conclusion, which can also display a regressive character, on the other hand. These reactions occur predominantly in cases where insurmountable inconsistencies in the group members’ orientations exist.

A major point in the orientation framework of the group was support and guidance in the achievement of autonomy through the involvement of both parents and care-givers. The participants felt that this involvement was intended to make the transition to autonomous living easier for them. Regarding the topic of money, the participants agreed that one must learn how to

deal with money and should not spend it all at once, but rather make a smart plan and spend carefully.

Table 2 *Summary of Communicative Action Patterns Utilized by Discussion Groups in Reaction to Imposed Framework Conditions*

Group characteristics	Group-specific pattern of communication	Communicative actions: Examples
“XMAS”		
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> the most inhomogeneous group in relation to geographic, cultural, and spoken language backgrounds 	<i>ironische Selbstentwertung</i> (ironic self-debasement)	<p>“I am the second Karin”</p> <p>(meaning I am the second piece of assembly-line autonomy production in the institution — and function suboptimally, like Karin)</p>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> the most homogeneous group in relation to age-span (2 years) male majority 	<i>Selbst-Überhöhung</i> (self-aggrandizement)	<p>“That’s how I really wanna end up, that’s cool”</p> <p>(“heroic” end-time scenario in which a young man orchestrated a drug-death fantasy, obsessed with his own effect, and reduced everyone else to passive spectators)</p>
“OSTERN”		
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> a relatively homogeneous group in relation to geographic, cultural, and spoken language backgrounds 	<i>Fantasie</i> (neutralizing of an uncomfortable topic through fantasy)	<p>“Let’s just buy a house all together!”</p> <p>“Yeah! With a hundred men!”</p> <p>(after a passage in which the “crisis in Italy” was discussed, and that it would be impossible to afford a flat even with a thousand euro wage, and therefore one would be forced to live with family, and if there are problems in the family then it’s a real problem.)</p>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> a relatively homogeneous group in relation to age-span (4 years) the only group with a female majority 	<i>positiv Denken</i> (neutralizing of an uncomfortable topic through positive thinking)	<p>“Hey, come on — look what you have got us talking about!”</p> <p>(a former colleague in the institution who started drinking and ended up homeless)</p> <p>“Let’s talk about [Kf’s name] fingernails.”</p>
“SILVESTER”		
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> the most homogeneous group in relation to geographic, cultural, and spoken language backgrounds 	<i>Normalisierung</i> (normalization)	<p>“Everyone is here to learn to be autonomous.”</p> <p>“Everyone is responsible” (for his own behaviour)</p>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> the most inhomogeneous group in relation to age-span (7 years) male majority 	<i>Regression</i> (using group rituals in a regressive manner)	<p>“We are wild animals”</p> <p>[and that’s performed in the group]</p> <p>“Money money money ...”</p> <p>“Mmmm mania mania mania...”</p> <p>“Gack gack gack gack...”</p> <p>“Meh...” (sounds like cows)</p>

The subject areas of cigarettes, alcohol, and drugs — means of addiction — were dealt with in diverse contexts: when the camera showed Am lighting his cigarette during a discussion; when the group members discussed how old one should be to drink and smoke and which colleagues were smokers; in relation to autonomy — how can one take care of oneself, to be responsible for oneself by “knowing what to do”; and finally in the acceptance of the obligation to protect oneself through abstinence from drugs and alcohol.

The topics of sex and sexual orientation and identity were first broached jokingly in respect to sexual organs (testicles and ovaries) and then in relation to the question, “Who is like which animal and which animal is better — for instance a rooster or a ’staller⁸”? Further discussion involved sexualized language clearly used to create a borderline between the adults in the context and the peer-context (“fuck you hard”). The group also sang a song together with sexual content (including the words “naked” and “fucking”). There was also a metadiscourse about one group member’s presumed lesbian relationship.

The topic of identity was considered when Om, the youngest in the group, presented a story of a beggar living in a garbage container. The group began to speak of how it would feel to be forced into living like that. The story was initially rejected by the group, because it didn’t have to do with the topic at hand, but then they did discuss it. In fact, it represents the negative orientation across groups, the image of “ending up under the bridge”. The beggar, given the name Bippo, had to survive under a bridge at the bottom of a garbage can as well as he could. When one of the group members ridiculed the beggar, the other members wondered how that member himself would feel if his own mother threw him under the bridge into the garbage can. Although not all members agreed, the group then found a rational reason why a person would sleep in the garbage can: it was better than dying of exposure. However, one group member said he would prefer death.

Conclusion

The analysis of group discussions based on the documentary method of interpretation revealed power-based hierarchical arrangements in the care setting through the detection of imposed framework conditions in the text. The initial question asked by the moderator in the group discussions reproduced the care setting by asking the young people exclusively about autonomy, which, as the main educational aim of the institution, engenders a demand that the young people ought to want to be autonomous. This creates a paradoxical situation in relation to the aim of autonomy, with which the young people must come to terms. In managing the paradoxical situation, and in reacting to the imposed framework conditions in the discussion, the participants utilized group-specific patterns of communicative action, which were reconstructed in the analysis. A compilation of the typology of the patterns of communicative action used by those in group care in residential homes would need a multitude of other cases for comparison. Different groups in

⁸ In the area where the research took place, “staller” is a slang term for a peasant with out-of-date views.

residential homes, and also reference groups in other institutions like schools, where similar but divergent structures and paradoxical arrangements might exist, could be included in investigations.

Carers must become aware that autonomy as the social pedagogical objective and learning outcome of youth in group care cannot be pursued directly and without obstacles. Ideally, those caring for young people will agree to an open-ended process, keeping autonomy in mind and accepting existing struggles for autonomy. The patterns identified in this study, as well as additional patterns, could be identified as a specific competence of youth residing in group care residential homes and could perhaps become a transferrable skill for care-leaving transition and in life after care. Empowerment of the care leaver should include articulation and recognition of their experiences and their knowledge, and should further support them in taking a role in the political discourse surrounding the professional care sector. The international youth assembly, which took place in Vienna in 2016 before and during the 33rd FICE International World Congress, can be seen as an important step in the development of a political voice for care leavers. Fifty-three young people from 15 countries, who either lived in care at the time or had recently lived in care, presented their concrete suggestions, as experts through experience, for the improvement of the professional and political context of child welfare (Koch, 2016, p. 304). Their 10 statements included, “All care leavers should be supported in becoming aware of and acknowledging their own potential, so that they are able to grasp the chance to develop it further” (Koch, 2016, p. 305). That the youth are capable of acting within the paradoxical arrangement of institutional care has been demonstrated in this study. An understanding of the influence of the paradox is necessary if we are to improve outcomes of the social pedagogical treatment model in residential care settings and thus improve the life chances of residential care alumni and the experience of leaving care for young adults.

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