

# Agency and flexible Support in Transition from Care: Learning from the Experiences of a Norwegian Sample of Care Leavers doing well<sup>1</sup>

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**Key words:** Aftercare, positive transitions, child welfare services, agency

## Abstract:

The main objective of this paper is to investigate the role that the Norwegian Child Welfare Services (CWS) can play in assisting care leavers with their transition to adulthood. Our point of departure is that timely and effective aftercare services must be understood from a relational perspective centred on the quality of the relationship between young adult and caseworker. The paper analyses in-depth interviews with 16 Norwegian young adults aged 20–32 who were either students or in stable employment at the time and thus considered to be doing well according to common indicators in studies of care leavers' outcomes. Two kinds of relationships between the young adults and CWS were identified: those who thought that CWS had recognized their needs and provided services accordingly and those who had either not been offered support or had been offered inadequate support. Our analysis indicates that a positive relationship between young adults and their caseworker facilitates both agency on the part of the young adult and provision of flexible support according to their needs. Implications for policy and practice will be discussed.

## Introduction

The objective of this paper is to develop more comprehensive knowledge about the role that Child Welfare Services (CWS) may play in assisting young care leavers with their transition to adulthood. Our point of departure is that timely and effective aftercare services must be understood from a relational perspective (Marion, Paulsen and Goyette 2017; Munford and Sanders 2015) through a combination of agency on the part of the young adult and offers of flexible support on the part of the caseworker. Flexible support is understood as a combination

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of social support and other services provided in a manner that is sensitive to changes over time. Agency and flexible support are seen as interconnected, with any one leading to the other depending on the communicative process unfolding between the young adult and the caseworker. We aim to investigate to what extent a relational perspective in this sense is useful to understanding how care leavers can experience aftercare services as helpful.

When compared to the general population of young adults, it is well established that many care leavers are forced to assume adult responsibilities in a compressed and accelerated manner while simultaneously confronting more obstacles on their path to adulthood (Courtney, Hook and Lee 2012; Stein 2012). Research from the last two or three decades has strongly suggested that young adults coming from a public care background share an elevated risk of several poor individual and social outcomes, particularly during the initial out-of-care phase of their lives (for an international review, see Stein and Munro 2008). On the other hand, research across countries shows that aftercare services improve such outcomes (Backe-Hansen et al. 2014) to a greater extent the longer they are maintained (Courtney, Hook and Lee 2012). Thus, it is important to increase existing knowledge about how such services can be provided in targeted and effective ways.

This article is based on an analysis of the experiences of a subset of care leavers aged 20–32 who were either students or in stable employment at the time they were recruited. These are commonly used indicators of doing well among young care leavers in cross-country analyses of administrative data sets as well as national comparisons between care leavers and other groups of young adults (Backe-Hansen et al. 2014; Vinnerljung and Sallnäs 2004).

Our aim here is not to determine why young adults in our sample did well in the sense defined above, nor to analyse their understanding of what doing well entails. Instead, the focus is on how to improve aftercare services through an analysis of a subset of young care leavers' experiences.

It is fairly common to interview young adults with child protection experiences (Höjer and Sjöblom 2014; Paulsen 2016; Scannapieco, Connell-Carrick and Painter 2007). However, our study differs in that it specifically targets care leavers who are doing well, which is in line with increased interest in researching young people from vulnerable groups who do well nevertheless (Bengtsson, Sjöblom and Öberg 2018). Implications for policy and practice will be discussed.

### **Understanding Aftercare as Relational Processes**

Over the past two decades, theorizing about care leavers' needs has been concentrating increasingly on relational versus the more technical aspects of service provision (Antle et al. 2009; Marion, Paulsen and Goyette 2017). That young adults prefer to and profit from becoming independent through a process of interdependence has been acknowledged (Propp, Ortega and NewHeart 2003; Storø, 2018) and discussed as an example of connected autonomy (Goodkind, Schelbe and Shook 2011), supportive relationships (Hiles et al. 2013; Paulsen and Berg 2016) or agency through relationships with significant others (Munford and Sanders 2015). Three important aspects of interdependency can be identified, namely supportive relationships, participation in decision-making and individualized and flexible services of a sufficient duration.

Recent research underlines the importance of positive and supportive relationships as one prerequisite of a successful transition to adulthood. Conversely, a lack of supportive networks is often found to be an important factor when young care leavers do not do well (Mendes, Johnson and Moslehuddin 2012). It may be argued that young people leaving state care need continuing support, albeit different kinds of support at different times (Jessen and Backe-Hansen 2017). Studies have focused on different kinds of social, emotional and practical support by way of supportive networks (Hiles et al. 2013; Höjer and Sjöblom 2014; Paulsen and Berg 2016) and based on the significance of the family, wider network or foster family and

other carers or mentors (Wade 2008). Economic support is extremely important as well (Bakketeig and Mathisen 2008; Hiles et al. 2013). This is in line with House et al.'s (1985) understanding of the concept of social support as multi-dimensional, encompassing emotional, instrumental, informational and appraisal dimensions.

In Munford and Sanders' (2015) longitudinal study of vulnerable young people in New Zealand, one key finding was how they enacted agency through their relationships with significant others like family members, social workers, teachers and care workers. The struggle for agency was reflected in three thematic clusters: making sense of the world, having a voice, and acting on the world. More generally, in their literature review van Bijleveld, Dedding and Bunders-Aelen (2015) argue that the relationship between the young person and the case manager is a significant important factor. Thus, a relational approach to participation recognizes the importance of having a voice in decision-making processes, rather than just being a part of them. In this, CWS plays an important role and lack of flexibility may influence care leavers in many ways. The caseworker may be too focused on age rather than individual needs when offering services (Bakketeig and Mathisen 2008), practical support may be prioritized over emotional support (Paulsen 2016) or care leavers might not succeed in presenting themselves as needing assistance (Bakketeig and Mathisen 2008).

Paulsen and Berg (2016) found that many care leavers do not receive enough information about the possibility of applying for aftercare services or about the services available. Nor does CWS adequately help care leavers inform their caseworkers about their situations and needs, which results in feelings of frustration and disempowerment. This relates to more general challenges and inadequacies in exercising agency (Bakketeig and Bergan 2013; Bakketeig 2015; Höjer and Sjöblom 2014). In addition, to be denied services may be interpreted as a message that the system does not care (Bakketeig and Mathisen 2008). Negotiations about services may thus have a relational meaning beyond the services themselves.

In the ensuing analysis, we will explore how care leavers in our sample experienced the issues of flexible social support and own agency.

## **The Norwegian Context**

### *Legal and administrative regulations*

In Norway, young people leave care at the age of 18. Until the age of 23, young people may receive aftercare services from CWS (Child Welfare Act [CWA] §1–3). The overall aim of these services is to ensure “that adolescents gradually become capable of managing on their own” (Q13/2011; 3, authors’ translation). CWS is encouraged to apply “flexibility and creativity” in providing services. It is important that CWS provides information to young people about the possibility of receiving further services. If the young person chooses to continue with services after the age of 18, CWS is obliged to make a plan for future services (§4–15). If services are either terminated at the age of 18 or an application for services after this age is denied, this should be justified according to the best interests of the child (CWA §4–1).

Although not a statutory obligation, CWS should:

- Make the young person aware that he or she can change his or her mind after refusing services; CWS should also try to stay in contact.
- Contact the young person again after one year to renew the offer of services.
- Assume a special responsibility to assist the young person in their contact with other agencies, for instance social services, psychological or health services.

Social services merits special mention. In Norway, CWS and the Labour and Welfare Administration (henceforth ‘social services’) are independent legal bodies. Social services administer various welfare benefits, for instance housing assistance. Its employment and social security schemes can function as a supplement or replacement for aftercare support from CWS.

### *Aftercare service provision in Norway*

During 2016, 6105 young adults aged 18–22 received child welfare services, demonstrating a clear downward trend by age (Table 1).<sup>2</sup> This distribution has been stable for many years (Clausen 2008).

➤ Insert Table 1 around here

As Table 1 shows, two-thirds of those receiving aftercare services were 18 or 19 years old, while one in five were 20 years old and one in ten were 21–22 years old. Whatever the reasons, it is obvious that the possibilities for prolonging aftercare services in order to facilitate gradual transition processes are not fully utilized. Although the need for such services may be greater immediately after leaving care, this does not preclude ongoing needs.

Throughout 2016, CWS offered 20,893 services, averaging 3.4 services per person. In Table 2, we list the frequency and rates of services that seem particularly relevant. These account for around 75 per cent of the services provided.

➤ Insert Table 2 around here

It must be noted that some of those included in these statistics will have had their 18<sup>th</sup> birthday during the year and thus been in foster or residential care as a care measure, not an aftercare provision, for part of the year. No information is offered about the proportion of 18 year olds to whom this pertained. From the age of 19, however, every service is by definition an aftercare service. Finally, since the unit of analysis in this table is services, not people, we cannot know how many individuals received the different types of aftercare provisions. Still, Table 2 paints a picture of how aftercare services are prioritized by CWS on a national basis.

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<sup>2</sup> Source for all statistics presented: Statistics Norway

As Table 2 shows, providing assistance with finding somewhere to live is important and altogether accounted for 41 per cent of the services provided. Another 21 per cent consisted of “other” economic assistance, without specifications of volume or duration. Other types of services, which also ought to be important based on existing knowledge of care leavers’ needs, were provided infrequently. Since Norwegian research indicates that the majority of foster children (Lehmann et al. 2013) and youth in residential care (Jozefiak et al. 2016) have mental health issues, it is worrisome that mental health services accounted for less than one per cent of the total. Although the actual services are provided by professionals outside of CWS, CWS can facilitate referrals and cover expenses. It is also interesting to note that family group conferences and network meetings accounted for even fewer of the services provided. A support person was also not provided very often, although this need is emphasized by young adults themselves (Paulsen and Berg 2016). Counselling and advice, which may imply support by the caseworker, only accounted for five per cent of the total.

In Norway, services connected with education and work are within the remit of other service providers. It may be argued that participation in collaborative teams is then sufficient on the part of CWS. Still, as the institution with an overall responsibility for aftercare provision CWS might take a more active role in helping young adults navigate their way through complicated systems of assistance.

## **Data and Method**

The research presented here reflects the Norwegian part of a larger study involving 72 young adults from Denmark, England and Norway. Each country recruited 24 participants from three different age groups: those on the threshold of adulthood, those in their early twenties and those in their late twenties or a bit older. The same semi-structured interview guide, which was

developed by the research team,<sup>3</sup> was used in all three countries. The participants were interviewed twice in the space of around one year. The results presented in this article are mainly based on the first wave of Norwegian interviews when we specifically asked about aftercare services.

### *Recruitment*

The Norwegian sample included 24 care leavers who were either students or in stable employment at the time of recruitment. To be included in the sample they also had to have been in care for at least three years. A convenience sample was constructed based on these criteria. The sample was recruited via two residential units (8), two municipal child welfare services (3), one foster care organization (3), two non-governmental organizations for young people with CWS experiences (9) and one university college (1). With two exceptions, the participants were living in different places in Eastern Norway. The remaining two lived in Western and Northern Norway, respectively.

### *Sample*

The participants were aged 16–32. The eight participants who were 18 years of age or younger were excluded from the analyses in this paper because they had not yet started to receive aftercare services. Table 3 summarizes the remaining 16 participants' experiences of adversity prior to placement and stability while in care.

➤ Insert Table 3 around here

Six participants were male and ten were female. Eight were either born in a country other than Norway or they were born in Norway to at least one parent of non-Norwegian origin. As Table

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<sup>3</sup> The cross-country research team consisted of one lawyer, two psychologists, one social worker, and two sociologists, all with PhDs using qualitative methodology.

3 shows, a large proportion of the sample had experienced significant adversity before their placement and/or instability in care.

Besides CWS, six of the young adults had been in contact with social services after the age of 18. Almost all had received some kind of help with mental health issues, mostly during their time in care, but a few after leaving care as well.

### *The interviews*

The first wave of interviews took place in 2015–2016. The interview guide included sets of questions related to the participants' present situation, their family and social relations, educational transitions and employment, housing, aftercare and life after being in care, with adaptations of the questions according to their age and situation. All interviews were recorded with the young person's consent and later transcribed.

### *Analysis*

The authors combined a phenomenological and a hermeneutical approach by placing the young person's own experiences at the centre of analyses while at the same time interpreting these in relation to their life stories and the institutional framework (Malterud 2012). The coding was done as a process of interpretation, starting close to the empirical data by first reading the interview transcripts several times. Second, we identified themes related to the young adults' experiences with aftercare services, like reasons for receiving or not receiving aftercare measures, their assessments of their aftercare measures and their relationships with their caseworkers. The third step included exploring similarities and differences in the material (Kvale and Brinkmann 2015). Through this analysis, different patterns emerged related to if and how CWS had been involved and how the young adults had interacted with CWS. To

develop and validate our analysis, preliminary findings were continuously discussed in the cross-country research group and with the participants when we re-interviewed them.

### ***Ethical considerations***

The Norwegian project was approved by the National Centre for Research Data. All participants were given pseudonyms and any specific details from their accounts that could increase the risk of identification and descriptions that could inadvertently lead to stigmatization were avoided or changed.

### **Results**

All but three of the 16 participants had received aftercare services, 10 of whom until they were aged 20 or older, which is longer than usual (cf. Table 1). Two had refused services, while one did not need any services as her former foster family satisfied her needs. Two subgroups emerged from our analysis. One was in interaction with caseworkers who recognized their needs and provided services perceived by the young people as timely and adequate. The second and largest subgroup found that for various reasons, relevant support was *not* offered or provided by CWS. Below, we will look more closely at both groups, particularly at their experiences of flexible social support and agency.

#### ***CWS recognizes their needs and provided timely and adequate support***

All five young adults in this group expressed satisfaction with the help they had received from CWS, as typified by Maggie (24) and Joanne's (23) experiences. Maggie, who was studying to become an engineer, had travelled to Norway alone from an Asian country as a teenager; she received aftercare services until she was 23. She had received some financial support, help with finding a bedsit and counselling from her caseworker and described her aftercare services as "fantastic". Joanne (23), who was studying to become a teacher, was generally pleased with her

aftercare services as well. Like Maggie, she had received services until she was 23, which included some financial assistance and counselling from her caseworker.

#### *A close relationship with their caseworker*

Both described having a good or even a close relationship with their caseworker. Maggie's contact with her caseworker took place through regular case meetings, which Maggie found sufficient. She and her caseworker had jointly set up a plan for future services that gave her direction in the process of becoming independent from the system. About their relationship she says: "*She took me very seriously, I felt I was heard and that she knew me.*" Joanne described a relationship with her caseworker that was difficult at first, but had developed into a close emotional relationship. As important in their relationship she emphasizes the following:

The fact that she was so available when I needed her and that I in a way was open to accept help from her and to talk to her (...) and I made weekly visits to her office to talk a bit so that she would get to know me and she followed up with me very closely (...). So now she is the best person in the world.

Her caseworker had promised to continue supporting her for as long as was necessary, despite her being too old for aftercare services, thus offering Joanne a sense of security and continuity.

#### *Flexible support*

Both Maggie and Joanne described receiving support that accounted for their shifting needs over time. Maggie had been provided with a place to live alongside adults who could give her support if needed, "*...as it is, they helped by finding a bedsit where I can live alone, while they are outside looking out for me if there is something I need.*"

Joanne also kept in contact with significant persons from her former institution. She says that something she

...really appreciates is that when you move on from the institution, it is not like you are finished with them forever, because that would be very sad. Because they watch out for

you, they invite you to Christmas gatherings and summer parties (...) so we always stay in touch, but it is up to us if we choose to do so or not.

Both young women stressed that help was available when they needed it. However, it was up to them to make use of it.

Even though their accounts provide limited information about the dialogue they had with their caseworkers when decisions were made about their aftercare services, we can assume that having a good relationship made communication about their needs for support easier. This may have increased their chances of receiving the services that they experienced as being timely and adequate. By leaving it up to the young adults to make use of the support provided, support was offered in a way that facilitated their autonomy in relation to their caseworkers. On the other hand, Maggie's involvement in planning for future services may also have influenced the flexibility of the support. However, we have less empirical data to support this assumption.

#### *CWS did not provide services or offered inadequate services*

Ten of the young adults found that CWS did not offer services, provided inadequate services or terminated services too early. Two had refused further services because of the negative experiences they had had with CWS or because they had been asked about aftercare at an inconvenient time. Lack of information about available services or the feeling that CWS did not understand their needs were reasons for the premature termination of services by some, along with the feeling that the services were not in accordance with their needs. Lack of information about aftercare measures has also been found in other studies and is not in accordance with existing legislation (Bakketeig and Bergan 2013; Paulsen 2016). Below, we explore these explanations more closely.

### *A poor or ambivalent relationship with their caseworker*

Care leavers in this group seemed to have had a poor or ambivalent relationship with their caseworker. This applied to those who refused services as well as those who felt they were offered inadequate services:

Peter (23), who held a senior position in a private firm, did not want further services, partly because of previous negative placement experiences but also because he thought it was too stressful and that CWS complicated things. He felt that he was treated as a "case", not as a person. He describes his relationship with his caseworker as quite poor: "... *In the dialogue with the caseworker, I felt like an animal. (...) The chemistry was not good or anything like that.*" Looking back, he did, however, appreciate that the caseworker had found him supported housing.

Albert (20) had a caseworker who was willing to help but did so in the wrong way, according to him, by taking the side of one of his parents whom he felt was manipulating the system. This created problems in his relations with his family members. Albert expressed having mixed feelings about his caseworker: *"There have been times when it has been okay to have her [as a caseworker], and at other times it has been a little bit bad and such."*

A poor or ambivalent relationship thus seems to have influenced the young adults' communication with their caseworkers. Some felt that their caseworkers did not understand their needs, which led to the premature termination of services or an offer of services that were not in accordance with their needs, as illustrated below.

*Lack of information and poor communication with their caseworker*

Liza (23), who was studying media and communication, had received aftercare until she was 20, when CWS terminated the services despite her application to prolong them. About applying for aftercare, she says:

I might add that I applied for aftercare (...) when I moved from (...). But the application did not come through. So, in a way it ended in a disruption when I moved from [names institution] — (...) CWS said that now you have to cope on your own, really.

The termination was unexplained, which is not in line with child welfare legislation. Liza explained that she did not like her caseworker, as she had been subject to decisions regarding previous placements with which she strongly disagreed.

Fran (23), who was midway through her undergraduate studies in sociology, expressed having mixed feelings towards her caseworker, as her impression was that the primary concern among caseworkers was to get the young adults out of the system. She had not received any services after the age of 19. She describes the process of leaving the child welfare system as follows:

They sent me out of the child welfare system when I was 19, when I had finished high school. At the time, they did not inform me that I could have had the opportunity to stay on until I was 23....

*Lack of flexibility and low degree of agency*

Receiving no support or the wrong kind of support according to one's experienced needs may be interpreted as a lack of flexibility by the young adults. For instance, Alec (22), who was working in a residential unit at the time of his interview, turned down an offer of aftercare services, which is something he later regretted. He explained that he rejected the offer because his caseworker approached him when he was simultaneously experiencing a very stressful event. For him, lack of flexibility was related to bad timing on behalf of CWS.

An experience of being offered the wrong kind of support may indicate little agency on the part of the young adults, sometimes because a poor-quality relationship between the young adult

and the caseworker makes both parties less inclined to communicate constructively. This may again lead to the young adult not being involved in the decisions that need to be made, or his or her stated needs not being followed up on by CWS.

Maryam (22), who was studying nursing, had received aftercare services between the ages of 18 and 20. She had annual meetings with CWS to show that she had passed her exams. She had received some financial support, but no help with budgeting, which she really felt she needed.

Liza (23) felt that she needed emotional support, which she did not get, while she did not need the practical support she was offered:

I have taken care of paying the bills for Mum and Dad since I was (...) little. And in a way, housework and those kinds of things have never been a problem (...). And often, at least when I was followed up with by a person from CWS (...), it was very much about practical things and I told them this is not something I need help with. I need (...) to have someone to talk to.

Finally, Sophie (26), by then finishing her undergraduate studies in child welfare, moved from foster care to a bedsit at age 17. CWS gave her some financial support, but otherwise supposed that Sophie's former foster parents would follow up with her. However, Sophie did not have a supportive relationship with them and was not offered another support person by CWS, although she had tried to persuade her caseworker that she needed one.

Even though we only have the care leavers' accounts upon which to base our analysis, and not those of the caseworkers, these experiences indicate a lack of flexibility in the system. The fact that the young adults told CWS what they needed without receiving appropriate services in return, at least not as they saw it, also reflects that they had little influence on the kinds of services they received.

#### *Other support persons may compensate for lack of support*

Five of the care leavers in this subgroup had another person to whom they could turn that provided more or less emotional and/or practical support, particularly former contact persons

in residential units. Alec (22) named a former contact person as one of the most important people in his life. The turning point in their relationship was when she decided to spend Easter with him even though she had made plans with her family. He did not have a good relationship with the others who worked in the unit, *“But she [his contact person] chose to stay to ensure that I had a nice Easter celebration.”* They remained in contact even several years later. Besides having appreciation for her as an individual, he also includes her family, particularly emphasizing the relational aspect: *“And I know her family well. So I have, in a way been included in the family.”* However, three others described being in situations where they did not have any adults available to support them at the time, underlining the vulnerable situation for some of these care leavers.

#### *Insufficient services may have serious implications*

Insufficient services had serious implications for some, resulting in abrupt transitions, of feelings of loss, of other services being terminated and for two it involved temporary drug and financial problems. Liza (23), for instance, had to move, and the therapy she was currently receiving was terminated. She says: *“...when everything happened the worst was all the disruptions (...) the feeling of being abandoned (...).”* She wanted to keep in touch with her contact person at the supervised housing unit but instead was only offered financial support for a short while, despite appealing the decision. Liza had a limited social network to fall back on and had to turn to a family member with whom she had a close but difficult relationship. Not being assessed as in need of continued services and having a poor relationship with her caseworker and a low degree of agency related to her own case, along with a limited social network to fall back on, exemplifies the factors that led to Liza’s abrupt transition to adulthood.

## Discussion

The main objective of this paper was to investigate whether a relational perspective on the quality of aftercare services is useful in understanding how care leavers can experience such services as helpful. The relational perspective was concretized as combining agency on the part of the young adult with flexible support over time on the part of the caseworker.

A closer analysis of the two subgroups showed that elements of flexible support and agency were important to both groups but manifested differently. In the first subgroup, these elements were highlighted as important when the care leavers described their satisfaction with the help they had received from CWS. We saw that flexible support was provided by the caseworkers in ways that allowed the care leavers to experience agency and influence their situations in positive ways. Like others have found, our analyses indicate that the quality of the relationship between caseworker and young adult is important (van Bijleveld, Dedding and Bunders-Aelen 2015).

When the young adults were satisfied with the services they had received, they found this relationship to be satisfactory. Conversely, when the young adults were dissatisfied, they were critical of the relationship as well. The second subgroup had experienced either inadequate service provision or, as was the case for two of them, no services were provided. This probably made their transition to adulthood more problematic than necessary. In terms of the two who chose not to continue with aftercare services, one could argue that this was the result of their own choices. However, negative placement experiences, lack of facilitation of agency and an ambivalent relationship with their caseworkers seem to have influenced their decisions.

Despite the fact that the majority of the group of care leavers with inadequate or no support had received aftercare services for longer than usual, they experienced a lack of agency. This may be the result of an ambivalent or poor relationship with their caseworker. A negative or

ambivalent relationship may again have contributed to the lack of relevant support. On the other hand, several in this subgroup had managed to establish and retain positive and nurturing relationships with other adults, particularly professionals from the residential units where they had stayed previously. This was important to them emotionally, and it reminds us that other relationships may be as important as the caseworker–young adult relationship when it comes to ensuring social and emotional support. However, these relationships cannot adequately substitute for the caseworker’s power to provide and follow up on services.

Lack of agency may also reflect a lack of flexibility in the system, as illustrated by those who were offered practical but not emotional support, even though the latter was what they needed. Besides indicating the need to see flexible support and agency as interconnected, this also underlines the necessity to factor issues related to the organizational context into the equation when working to improve aftercare services. For instance, low flexibility may also be a result of a too-heavy workload, too few resources or other systems factors that are beyond the scope of this paper.

## **Conclusion**

Taking a relational perspective of the experiences of young adults transitioning from care has proven useful by enabling us to look at several important elements together instead of focusing on support, participation or relationships with caseworkers, for example. A care leaver’s good relationship with his/her caseworker seems to be associated with experiencing agency and satisfaction with their aftercare services, while an ambivalent relationship seems to be associated with the opposite, thus indicating an interconnection between flexible support and agency. It is important to note that all our participants had done well according to our established indicators. Thus, a poor relationship with a caseworker is not necessarily associated with poor outcomes, although it may make the transition to adulthood more challenging.

Even though our results and those of other studies indicate that there is a connection between flexible support and agency (see Hiles et al. 2013), more in-depth knowledge is needed to explain this interconnection. We need to know more about the prerequisites for establishing and maintaining a high-quality relationship between care leavers and their caseworkers. An important question in this regard is to what extent do individual needs and/or individual resources and agency influence who receives services, including the content and duration of services. This knowledge is necessary to improve aftercare services for the child welfare population.

### *Implications for policy and practice*

We have explored experiences with aftercare services in a sample of care leavers doing well. It may be expected that the need for extended services will be even stronger for care leavers in general. Some will probably be less capable of communicating their needs to their caseworkers, thereby underlining the need for caseworkers to assume a proactive role in their contact with young adults leaving care. CWS also needs to become more aware of how care leavers' needs vary over time. In addition, an important task for CWS would be to help identify existing, nurturing relationships or help young people in care establish such relationships, for instance through network meetings (Jessen and Backe-Hansen 2017).

The answer to these challenges is not necessarily more regulation. The Norwegian system has several regulations in place that can suffice if properly implemented. It might help to make some of these regulations mandatory instead in order to ensure that young adults ageing out of public care are prioritized. When the state assumes responsibility for a child or a young person, there should be an attendant ethical obligation for it to offer adequate assistance throughout the transition to adulthood. Consequently, CWS should acknowledge that it is responsible for the young adults who have been in public care until they are demonstrably able to fend for

themselves. This would mean prolonging services for a far larger proportion of care leavers than at present, which would require an amendment to the current legislation, or obliging CWS to assume a stronger responsibility for coordinating collaboration with other social services.

### *Limitations*

A study based on a sample of care leavers that are doing well is not representative of care leavers in general. Due to our recruitment procedure, most of our sample likely consists of young people who are above average in terms of their self-reflection and interest in improving the system. Since one of the main purposes of the study is to develop a deeper understanding of the more profound dynamics of leaving care in order to see what lessons this body of knowledge can offer in order to improve policy and practice, we do not perceive this as a serious limitation.

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