



## Article

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# **The transition to adulthood from care as a struggle for recognition**

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## ***The transition to adulthood from care as a struggle for recognition***

### **Introduction**

In this article we focus on young people transitioning to adulthood from child welfare services, and how the concept of recognition can be useful for understanding the complexity of young people's needs in this transition. We draw upon Honneth's (1996) theory of intersubjective recognition as a way of understanding young people's experiences of their contact with child welfare services.

We ask how recognition theory can help us to understand young people's experiences and needs in their transition to adulthood from child welfare services, and what are the practical implications. We focus on relationships, participation and social support as the three components highlighted by the young people who participated in interviews. Previous research also indicates that young people leaving care often face challenges related to creating and maintaining good relationships (Marion *et al.*, 2017; Rutman & Hubberstey, 2016), participating effectively in decisions (Authors reference 1) and receiving good quality social support (Barry, 2010; Höjer & Sjöblom, 2010; Authors reference 2; Authors reference 3; Thomas, 2005). We argue that Honneth's theory is potentially useful, in that these three elements appear to depend on, and imply, the kinds of recognition that he identifies. This theoretical framework provides us with an analytical tool that enables us to understand the young people's negative stories as experiences of *misrecognition*, and to show the complexity of the dynamics that shape recognition and misrecognition for this group (Warming, 2015).

### **Honneth's theory of recognition**

Honneth (1995) has built a theory of social progress that is founded on the concept of recognition as a fundamental element in human interaction and individual and group identity (Thomas, 2012). The basis of Honneth's theory is the connection between the self-relationship and the self-other relationship, and this is also the foundation for thinking of the personal along with the public and for the moral requirement of recognition (Warming, 2015). Honneth claimed that the conditions for self-realisation rest on three forms of recognition within day-to-day relationships, which he and other scholars refer to variously as 'love, rights and solidarity', 'care, respect and esteem', or 'emotional, legal and social recognition'. He further argues that recognition as love grounds self-confidence, that recognition of rights is a foundation of self-respect, and that social recognition is the basis of self-esteem.

Honneth argues that love represents the first stage of reciprocal recognition, and regards *emotional recognition* during early childhood as essential to the formation of a person's core identity. Love relationships are understood here as referring to primary relationships insofar as they are constituted by strong emotional attachment among a small number of people, as in the case of friendships, parent-child relationships, or erotic relationships between lovers (Honneth, 1996).

Honneth focuses particularly on emotional recognition in childhood; he does not talk specifically about children's need for recognition except in the context of primary relationships

of love and care, appearing to regard children only as ‘adults in waiting’ (Thomas, 2012, p. 458). We follow here the work of Thomas (2012) and Warming (2015), who have shown that Honneth’s theory can be related in fuller terms to children and young people when children are seen as having agency, as in the more recent social study of childhood. Warming (2015) argues that the need for emotional recognition goes beyond early childhood, and that young people and adults also need caring and loving relationships to establish and maintain self-confidence and relationships characterized by mutuality. Thus relationships are dependent on a delicate balance between independence and attachment (Honneth, 1996). This is highly relevant to young people’s transition to adulthood, where the struggle between being independent and at the same time needing support is evident (Authors reference 3; Rogers, 2011). This is often referred to as ‘interdependence’ (Propp *et al.*, 2003), which can be a particular challenge for care leavers as their transition is frequently sudden, with less possibility of gradual and in(ter)dependent transitions to adulthood. Independence, or even interdependence, has to be supported by an affective confidence in the continuity of shared concern. Without the felt assurance that the loved one will continue to care after one becomes independent, it is impossible for the loving subject to achieve that independence (Honneth, 1996).

The second form of recognition is *legal recognition*, which is where ‘subjects reciprocally recognize each other with regard to their status as morally responsible’ (Honneth, 1995: 110). This means that one is recognised as a member of a community of rights-bearing individuals, entitled to respect as a person. But this form of recognition goes beyond legal rights and formal acknowledgement, to realisation and active support in practice (Warming, 2015, p. 4). Honneth argues that self-respect comes from legal recognition, just as basic self-confidence comes from the love relationship. For young people moving on from the care system, being respected as having rights as persons to participate in decisions about their own lives, and being supported to exercise those rights, can be of critical importance.

The third form of recognition, *social recognition*, is characterised by solidarity and shapes both the social values and norms and the individual’s feelings of belonging to a community. Social recognition is based on our need for a form of social esteem that allows us to relate positively to our specific traits, abilities and accomplishments. Persons can feel themselves to be ‘valuable’ only when they know that they are ‘recognised for accomplishments that they precisely do not share in an undifferentiated manner with others’ (Honneth, 1996, p. 125). Rossiter (2014) argues that the outcome of this kind of recognition is self-esteem, and that lack of self-esteem, and uncertainty about one’s own worth, can jeopardise one’s sense of agency. We see in what follows that this kind of recognition, or its absence, features strongly in young people’s accounts of their experiences.

Our aim in this paper is to explore some of the ways in which concepts of recognition, as articulated by Honneth, can help us to understand young people’s experiences of transitional support from care. In particular we want to identify some of the factors that distinguish positive from negative experiences of the process, and successful from unsuccessful outcomes.

## **Methodological approach**

### *Recruitment and sample*

The study is based on conversations with 43 adolescents between the ages of 17 and 26 years (13 young women and 30 young men), through a combination of focus group interviews (five groups with 23 young people in total) and individual interviews with 22 young people. Two young people chose to attend both focus group and individual interviews. At the time of the interview 21 young people had no assistance from the child welfare service; most had ended contact around age 18, and the rest around age 20.<sup>1</sup>

Young people were recruited via workers in two departments of the child welfare service which support young people facing challenges in their transition to adulthood. The aim was to interview young people who were currently receiving or had received assistance in transition to adulthood, and based on this we chose a 'strategic sample' (Johannessen *et al.*, 2010). When recruiting young people, workers were asked to communicate information to all young people in the target group who were receiving support at that time, provided there were no ethical reasons not to ask them. They also contacted young people who had previously received support from the two services. In all 80 young people were invited to participate, of whom 59 responded positively. Of the 59, some changed their minds later, some did not respond when they were contacted by the researcher and some failed to show up for the interview. In all, 45 young people participated in the interviews. Two interviews are not used in this article because the young people were only 16 years at the time of the interview and therefore not regarded as in transition to adulthood. Of the remaining 43 young people, nine had a minority ethnic background: two of these were born in Norway, and the others had moved to Norway with their families at an early age.

These young people had faced a variety of challenges through their childhood and adolescence. They had in common that they and their families had been in need of close follow-up from the child welfare service during parts of their childhood and adolescence, mostly for an extended period. The young people had received a range of different support services (*hjelpetiltak*) throughout childhood and adolescence. For 15 of the young people who participated in focus groups, it is not known whether they were taken into care; of the remaining 28, 25 had been taken into care (*omsorgstiltak*) and accommodated in foster homes or residential institutions. Some had been in care for only a short time, whilst others had been in care since they were of pre-school age. Many of the young people had experienced situations of misrecognition in child-parent relations; violence, neglect and alcohol – and/or substance abuse. Many had experienced multiple moves, with their families and also within child welfare services. One young person had lived in eight different institutions; most had moved two or three times within

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<sup>1</sup> In Norway legislation provides that young people who receive support from the child welfare service before turning 18 years have the possibility to receive support until the age of 23, if the young person consents to this. The child welfare service has no automatic duty to give support until this age, but the decision has to be made 'in the best interest of the child'. The child welfare services are also required to provide a written decision if they refuse to offer support to young people in this period, and a young person then has the opportunity to complain about this decision (Fransson & Storø, 2011; Authors reference 4).

the child welfare system. This means that many of the young people had experienced lives of instability, with many relocations and disrupted relationships, both in their informal and formal networks.

#### *Conducting the interviews*

Individual interviews focused on each young person's life story, personal experiences and thoughts, inspired by narrative methods (Creswell, 2012). With an open approach to their experiences and story, young people talked about their contact with the child welfare service both at the time of the interview and throughout their childhood and adolescence, which gave both a snapshot and a retrospective look.

In focus group discussions, young people were at the beginning of the interview informed about the themes we were interested in, but were also given space to discuss the themes they found important. Whilst individual interviews centred on life stories and personal experiences, focus group discussions gave more insight into their general experiences; although in two focus groups participants did talk more personally.

#### *Ethical considerations*

The research was approved by the Norwegian Social Science Data Service (NSD) and carried out in line with ethical guidelines for research in social science and guidelines for inclusion of children in social science. Children and young people are a group with whom researchers need to take particular care with ethical considerations. In the data collection we were conscious that the themes addressed could raise questions, reactions and feelings in participants during or after the interviews and discussions, as underlined by Keller *et al.* (2016). It was therefore clarified that employees who knew the young people and had relationships with them would be available for the participants if they wanted to talk to them after the interviews. In addition, participants were given the interviewer's contact information in case they wanted to make contact afterwards.

#### *Analysis*

In qualitative research, knowledge is developed from experiences by interpreting and summarizing the organised empirical data (Malterud, 2012). All interviews were transcribed and read several times in order to get an overview and really get to 'know the data'. The analysis focused on how participants talked about their needs in transition to adulthood, how these needs were met by the child welfare services, and how they talked about their contact with the employees in child welfare services. Participants often spoke of the difference between the *caseworker*, who makes the decisions on what support services young people can have in their transition to adulthood, and their contact worker in transition, referred to below as the *social worker*. Both caseworkers and social workers are employed in the child welfare service, but their roles are distinct.

Each individual interview was analysed separately, to gain insight into each young person's individual life story through an initial longitudinal analysis. Following this, all the interviews were analysed together, drawing on the approach of *systematic text condensation* (STC). This

is a descriptive approach that presents the experiences of participants as expressed by them, rather than exploring the possible underlying meaning of what is said. It is a good method for cross-case analysis and aims for thematic analysis of meaning and content of data across cases (Malterud, 2012). When presenting the data we use quotations from the young people in order to illustrate examples or to underline points of special importance, to give a deeper insight into some of the data and to better understand the findings.

A limitation of STC can be that the individual stories are decontextualised. By combining this cross-case analysis with the initial longitudinal analysis of each individual interview, the individual context may be better preserved. However, summaries of individual participants' accounts also imply reduction, interpretation, and comparison with the other accounts in some way or other. In this way, some information is always lost during the multiple steps of reducing information as part of analysis.

### **Empirical findings**

In what follows we show what young people talked about as important in their transition to adulthood related to their contact with the child welfare services in this period of their life, and how their struggle for recognition comes into view through these narratives. Through the analysis there were three themes in particular that emerged as important in young people's experiences of their contact with the child welfare services in transition to adulthood: having good relationships to caring adults, being listened to and able to influence their own lives, and receiving support and encouragement. These themes ran through all of the interviews, and we did not find any systematic differences based on gender, age and ethnicity. These three themes clearly relate to Honneth's modes of recognition, as reflected in the following three sections.

#### *The importance of good relationships – emotional recognition*

We start by looking at the importance of good relationships. Young people talked a lot about the importance of having caring and affectional relationships that give them emotional support in transition to adulthood. This can be seen in terms of Honneth's account of the need for emotional recognition through caring relationships, and also Warming's (2015) idea that the need for emotional recognition goes beyond early childhood, and that young people and young adults also need caring and loving relationships.

Several participants told us that they did not have such caring relationships during their transition to adulthood. They said that they had limited emotional support from the informal network of parents, some because they did not have contact with them and some because their parents were preoccupied with managing their own lives, as illustrated in this comment:

*At a very young age I saw that mum was struggling, so I tried to do stuff that made her forget about the difficult things (...) I have always been very understanding and my mum have talked to me about everything. So I have always taken on a lot of responsibility and made sure that mum is OK. So it is more like I support her than the other way around... (Young woman, 19 years).*

The limited emotional support and care from the informal network makes the support from the formal network even more important and many of the youth therefore turn to the employees in the Child Welfare services for such support. Through the interviews it gets clear that this also includes the emotional support and the wish and expectation of being “cared for” in formal relations, which came to light both when they talked about the caseworker and the social worker.

One young person said this about the importance of caring, in relation to the social workers that had worked with her:

*I think it is important how they show that they really care. That they really try to understand the situation and they really try everything to help you succeed (...) I wish more of the caseworkers also were like that. That is the most important thing, that they care (Young woman, 19 years).*

When talking about the caseworker, this was often related to the lack of such support/recognition. Many described feeling that the caseworker did not have time for them and did not really care about them, was difficult to contact and not there when they needed support. They felt that they were treated like ‘cases, not human beings’ and they referred to the worker not respecting them, not listening to them and appearing uninterested in really getting to know them. When a young person calls their caseworker repeatedly without getting a response, this reinforces their feeling that the caseworker does not care and cannot be relied on. One of the youths said about his caseworker:

*I have tried to call her again and again, and also left a message for her. Last time we met we discussed something that she should look into, and she said she would call me to let me know what she found out. But she hasn't called me yet; they never do... You can't really trust them (Young man, 18 years).*

When the young people described good and caring relationships, these were more often with the social workers who support young people in transition to adulthood. They then talked of being met with respect from people who were interested in *getting to know* them, *recognised* them through listening to their meanings and taking them seriously, showed that they cared about them, in contrast to the distant and formal approach that they often met with other helpers, as illustrated in this quotation:

*For me, when they have helped me, they have been a bit more personal. They haven't like, used their leisure time on it, but they have had a more personal role over a professional role... So for me it feels easier to talk to them as human beings, instead of a “system”. I get to be myself. (Young man, 21 years)*

When young people talked about adults with whom they had good relationships, they seemed to know something about the workers – their families, lives and interests. They said this was an important element in having trust in the workers, because they felt that the workers also showed



trust in them by telling about themselves. This seems to indicate the importance of mutuality in the relationship – that both parties have to give and receive in order to build relationships based on mutual recognition. When describing their relationships with social workers, young people used terms such as *almost like my family, a big brother, weird uncle and aunts, my second dad, like a big brother*, showing that ‘formal’ relationships can be perceived as informal by the young people.

Young people who had limited support from their informal support network of adults often wanted to continue the contact with social workers, and several participants spoke of the importance of the relationship *in itself*, and of knowing that they have someone who cares for them and *is always there if they need them*. One challenge for these young people is that many of these supportive relationships end in their transition to adulthood, when they leave the child welfare system. Many of them lose the contact with their former foster parents and with the staff at the institutions/residential care units and at the same time with the social workers who have supported them in transition to adulthood and from whom they have had important emotional support. One participant said:

*It would have been good if they tried to have more contact with the youth after the support is formally ended, I think that would have been smart. And not just throw people out immediately when they turn 18 years... Many are not ready, at least I wasn't. It was difficult... that the people you had relied on suddenly... you know... wasn't there anymore* (Young woman, 24 years)

Participants said that in some cases their social workers told them that they could still contact them, but that they find this difficult once the contact is formally ended. This removal of the relationship and its emotional support are often associated by the young people with an *absence of care*.

#### *Participation – recognition as respect for rights*

One of the main concerns expressed by young people when talking about their contact with caseworkers was the lack of information, participation and collaboration. This can be seen in terms of Honneth's account of the need for legal recognition, which according to Warming (2015) goes beyond legal rights and formal acknowledgement, to realisation and active support in practice. The young people talked about feeling that they were not listened to, and did not have their opinions taken into consideration. They said that a lack of participation had been an ongoing issue in their contact with the child welfare service through their childhood. When they were in their early school years they were seldom or never invited to meetings, and therefore did not get the chance to participate. When they got older, they were more often invited to meetings, but still felt that their opinions were given little attention, often describing the meetings as ‘informational’ or ‘consultative’, as in this example:

*I haven't really talked much to my caseworkers. I just remember the last one, but I don't even remember her name. I haven't had very much contact with them, it is just maybe...*

*what shall I say... summary meetings. It has been a lot of them over the last years, because I was about to become an adult* (Young woman, 21 years).

This participant added that she did not feel listened to, and that support from the child welfare system was ended when she was aged 19, even though she felt that she needed continuing support and had tried to say so in meetings. Several participants related similar experiences, and many described feeling overruled by their caseworker in the child welfare service and their opinion not being taken into consideration, as in this example:

*They never listened to what I said, so I gave up (...) It is not any point in being there, when I am not listened to after all ...* (Young woman, 22 years)

This illustrates young people's struggle to be heard and to influence decisions, and shows how such continued struggle can end in the young person giving up on trying to participate and be heard, of which we find several examples in our data. When young people attend meetings and are not listened to, some say that after a while they do not bother to show up, because it does not seem to matter whether they are there or not. This of course results in them having even less opportunity to participate and influence decisions, and makes it easier for support to be ended regardless of their wishes and feelings. Just before a young person turns 18, there is a change in their opportunity to make decisions, because they now have a legal right to decide whether they want to continue receiving support. Some young people are not sufficiently informed of the possibilities of aftercare and support into adulthood, and so are not given a real choice. Others are told by their caseworkers that when they turn 18 and 'become adults' they can choose for themselves. The challenge is, however, that young people often receive insufficient information to make well-informed choices.

Young people seldom describe a collaborative participation in contact with the caseworkers, either before or after they reached the age of majority, so they are not given the active support that Warming (2015) is pointing at. What seems to happen is that workers suddenly switch from making choices on behalf of young people to expecting them to make big decisions themselves, without a gradual approach and often without enough support and guidance, or as one of the youth put it with a smile: *they expected me to know everything, like I suddenly became an oracle* (Young man, 23 years). This means that the delicate balance between autonomy and support, which is crucial in this phase of life, is not achieved, so jeopardising the young person's ability to achieve agency.

The relationship with the worker seems to have an impact on young people's participation. Young people say that a good relationship makes it easier for them to ask questions and express their opinion, and makes them *want* to meet with adults, attend meetings and participate.

*It is much easier to talk to people when you know them, and they know you* (Young man, 24 years).

In connection with this, there seems to be a correlation between how many caseworkers the young person has had and how much he or she has participated. Young people who have had several caseworkers appear to have participated less, because they did not regularly meet their caseworker, or sometimes even did not know who their caseworker was. The more caseworkers a child has had, the more difficult it seems to develop a good relationship, which again will affect the possibilities of legal recognition through participation. This reinforces the importance of continuity and stability for children and young people in the child welfare service.

Their narratives indicate that these young people are not given the equal possibilities of participation that are necessary for experiencing legal recognition and self-respect. The limited information they receive does not give the young people realistic choices, as they do not really know what their options are. In addition, they are not part of planning and forming the support, both because of the limited information and because the meetings are often adult-led and initiated and do not give sufficient place to young people's perspectives and contributions.

#### *Social support – recognition as esteem and solidarity*

Through the conversations with young people it was clear that most of them struggle in their transition to adulthood because they have limited social support. Many of them have limited informal networks when they leave the child welfare services, and some have challenging relationships with their parents. In these circumstances the social worker that follows them in their transition to adulthood seems to represent a crucial source of support for those who have it.

Young people emphasised the need for different forms of social support in transition to adulthood, which we may distinguish as emotional, practical, affirmational guidance and participation support (Authors reference 3). Of special importance for social recognition is the need for *affirmational guidance*, which may be seen in terms of Honneth's "solidarity". The need for such support becomes most evident when young people describe what has been helpful for them in building faith in themselves and what they can accomplish in the future, where they often highlight affirmational guidance and the importance of being met in an encouraging way. One young person still in contact with the child welfare service said this about their contact with social workers:

*When I talk to them, they always believed in me. If I have done something that wasn't very smart we talked and found out why things had turned out to be like this and how I could learn from this till next time (...) They always look ahead and focus on the positive... it gives me hope (Young man, 17 years).*

This experience was in contrast to how he was treated in other meetings or institutional settings. He and other participants described how often in life they meet adults, in school and in the child welfare system, who have low expectations of what they can achieve and who do not seem to think that they can manage their lives. This can leave them feeling doubtful about what they can accomplish in the future. Young people also related that *caseworkers* too often focus on

their challenges and failings, while *social workers* are more likely to see their potential and focus on their strengths. One said:

*In every meeting with my case worker, I was told what I should not do... Not drink too much, not get into a fight, avoid getting into trouble. Always focus on the negative you know... But when I talked to [social worker] we focused on how I should get to school, my plans for the future and how I should deal with obstacles I met [...] They believed in me, and they helped me find my own way (Young man, 22 years).*

Being met with only negative responses can be seen as an experience of *misrecognition*. Honneth claims that humans need a form of social esteem that allows them to relate positively to their concrete traits and abilities. This cannot be merely based on a set of trivial or negative characteristics – what distinguishes oneself from others must be something valuable. Absence of ‘achievement recognition’ can promote uncertainty about one’s own worth because it negatively affects the young person’s self-esteem (Rossiter, 2014). One young person said:

*It is hard to explain... But when you always get the feeling that they do not believe you can manage, you start believing so yourself (Young woman, 23 years)*

As social recognition is closely linked to one’s accomplishments and contributions, affirmational guidance and a focus on positive contributions and the ability to manage is crucial. An important part of affirmational guidance is therefore to have faith in the young person, thus enabling them to have faith in themselves. Without such support they may not have the self-esteem they need in order to see the worth of their own contributions in society, which may also influence their feeling of belonging in the community.

## **Discussion**

It is clear from the evidence presented here that the quality and content of relationships is central to young people’s experiences of support (or lack of it) in their transition from care. This is not in itself a new insight, but it confirms what other research has found. For example, Scannapieco *et al.* (2007) showed how stable relationships and social support are crucial in providing a foundation for new, trusting relationships and replacing feelings of isolation and disconnection that young people may have once felt while in the foster care system. Being engaged in positive relationships can assist young people in developing the skills and knowledge necessary to live and function independently after ‘ageing out’ of foster care (Marion *et al.* 2017).

What is more striking is how often ideas of *recognition* feature in the stories of these 43 young people, and how the thematic categories that emerged relate to Honneth’s categories of intersubjective recognition. The need for recognition through good relationships, rights and solidarity are expressed by all the young people in the study, independent of age, gender and ethnicity. Even though the sample is limited and the findings therefor cannot be generalised, this is an interesting finding. In our opinion it underlines the importance of recognition as a basic need for all young people and it strengthens the significance of recognition as a fundamental element in human interaction.

When reflecting on these findings in the light of Honneth's theory, we see an immediate correspondence of the need for a good relationship to emotional recognition, the need for participation to legal recognition and the need for affirmational support to social recognition. This is not an exact correspondence, because the categories tend to overlap and the three modes of recognition interweave with each other, so that each component is important for the realisation of the others. For example, the need for social support also relates to emotional support and to good participation processes. As Thomas (2012: 463) argues and also is clear in this research, all three modes of recognition (love, rights and solidarity) are essential for children and young people's full participation: children do not engage fully if 'they do not feel a sense of warmth and affection; they cannot participate equally if they are not respected as right-holders; and they will not have a real impact unless there is mutual esteem and solidarity, and a sense of shared purpose.'

It is clear from the findings here that young people in the child welfare system face a struggle to obtain recognition in transition to adulthood, especially due to limited social support, limited participation and the challenges of 'sudden adulthood'. The composition of their social network seems to be one of the challenges for young people leaving care as many young people in this study experienced limited support in their informal network of adults and so turned to the social worker who followed them in transition to adulthood for various types of support, including emotional and affirmational support. Similar findings are also pointed out by Singer, Berzin, and Hokanson (2013) who found that young people expressed an extensive reliance on child welfare professionals for various types of support.

The challenge for these young people is that also this supportive relationship comes to an end, often in early adulthood, and the young person then feels left alone when they exit the child welfare system. This 'sudden onset adulthood' not only removes the young person's emotional support and recognition, as we have already seen: it also does not promote the balance between independence and attachment which Honneth claims that sound relationships depend on. So the sudden adulthood that these young people experience not only removes their source of care and emotional recognition, it also removes them from people who could have motivated them, focused on their positive contributions to the society and helped them find resources and support into adult life. Without such support there is a risk that they will struggle to be included in full terms in society. Partly because they do not have the necessary believe in their concrete traits and contributions to society and also because lasting relationships have been shown to be a predictor of successful functioning subsequently (Curry & Abrams, 2014; Marion & Paulsen, 2017; Marion et al., 2017; Refaeli *et al.*, 2016).

Aside from what we can learn here about the salience of issues of recognition in the young people's relationships with caseworkers and social workers, there is also a question of how young people are recognised, or misrecognised, by institutions (the child welfare service) and by the State. The 'new accountability approach' tends to construct children as objects rather than 'morally sane citizens' (Warming, 2015, p. 12), which may be one of the reasons why the child welfare service struggle to include children and young people in collaborative

participation processes. The denial of social support, the expectations of independence and 'instant adulthood' can also be seen as a failure of legal recognition, as it means that the same opportunities are not extended to these young people in their transition to adulthood as to their peers. They are not supported in the way that good parents support their children in transition to adult life (as also underlined by Mendes and Moslehuddin (2006). Such limited possibilities of interdependent transitions remove the young people from emotional support and emotional recognition, and fail to ensure the delicate balance between independence and attachment which characterizes relationships of mutual recognition (Honneth, 1996).

### **Conclusion – implications for social work practice**

We have shown that the theory of recognition can help us understand and unfold the challenges for young people leaving state care, and in particular how experiences of misrecognition can threaten the foundations of self-confidence, self-respect and self-esteem. Young people reported that positive experiences of transitional support involved: (i) a relationship with a worker that expressed genuine care and mutual affection; (ii) respect for their views and wishes, to the extent of keeping them fully informed and involving them actively in decision-making; and (iii) support based on recognition of their personal strengths and a belief in their ability to succeed in the world. Where these things were not present, the experience was of being unsupported and left to founder, or at best to flounder.

This gives direction to social works practice and show how the transitional support needs to focus broadly on the youths life situation and have a holistic approach where youths feel cared for and loved in key helping relationships (Munson et al., 2015). It also point at the need for an strength-based approach. Another key element in providing the necessary support is facilitating good participation processes where youth are seen as a collaborative partners and where their voices are valued. The findings in this article also underline the need for creating and maintaining supportive relations of consistency and continuity, as also pointed out in previous research (Munson et al., 2015; Paulsen & Berg, 2016; Rutman & Hubberstey, 2016). Such support can be found in both formal and informal relations. However: a relevant question in this matter is if and how `formal` relations can be compared to family-like relations and if such relations can fulfill the need for emotional recognition. When we know that such relations are often ended at some point, it is also important to work with informal network relations (Marion et al., 2017).

By facilitating transitions where youth are given emotional recognition, are respected as rightholders and given believe in themselves through affirmational support, they can be given possibilities of realizing their potential and being fully included in society.

Honneth argues that it is the experience of misrecognition that provokes the *struggle* for recognition; so a final question is what this research can tell us about that process. In this research we do not find particular examples of young people reflecting on, or reacting to, their negative experiences and attempting to achieve more positive recognition, either individually or collectively. Other research (O'Kelly, 2016) suggests that coming together in groups to share their experiences can provide a space in which young people can make common cause and take

action to assert their claims to be recognised as valuable persons. The absence of such examples here may be related to the limited focus on group interventions and empowerment in the Norwegian child welfare system. Be that as it may, further research should explore whether stories of individual frustrations can give a clue to the conditions that enable young people to engage in this struggle, rather than subside into forms of hopelessness.

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